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THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE



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14



TRUTH OF THE CAT

During **Zenjirou's** visit to the **Twin Kingdoms**, the **Elehalieucco** and **Reiferon** families offer him the gift of dash drakes in thanks for the new dual-burn parchment. After accepting the gifts and returning to **Capua**, he starts learning **how to ride** them from **Aura**, alongside **Freya**, in the gardens of the inner palace. Then, Zenjirou heads alone via **teleportation** to **Uppasala** in order to inform them of the Twin Kingdoms's link to the White Empire. A secret meeting with **King Gustav** and **Prince Yngvi** sees Uppasala joining the alliance against the threat of the church. During that conversation, a **gray cat carrying a gem in its mouth** appears in the room. **"The gray cat is Utgard's messenger."** The green gem unfolds into a **green plate**, an invitation from **Utgard**. The addressee on it is...

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INTRODUCTION



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Prologue — The Founding Myth

It was long in the past.

There was a great continent, with a large country situated on it.

“The White Empire.” Now, no one knows whether that was its official name or some form of nickname. It was, however, the only name passed down through the ages to refer to that country.

The White Empire was a country ruled by twelve royal families, each of which had a powerful lineal magic. Energy, creation, contract, enchantment, unyielding soul, freedom, revival, compression, destruction, healing, recording, and the stars. With their lineal magics pertaining to each of those domains, the White Empire formed the largest culture on the continent, to the extent where it was said, “The only things the White Empire cannot do are those of which it cannot conceive.”

However, even that empire at its height would fall.

If one were to inspect the causes of its fall, one would eventually arrive at the word “pride.” The empire placed too much faith in its own strength and continued its expansion, reaching for an inviolable land.

Inviolable land—holy land. In other words, the area where the dragons lived.

They were the custodians (and, some held, creators, though that had been refuted by the dragons themselves) of the world. Taking up arms against them, even for the empire at its peak, was naught but foolishness.

The time between their invasion and the destruction of their country numbered a mere seven days. It was said that the White Empire had been razed to the ground, leaving no trace behind.

The dragons’ flames did not even scorch the land, plants, or animals, only burning the empire’s creations. Thus, the prosperous country fell. However, that was not the same as the ruling families being wiped out. A scant few royal families had escaped the dragons’ judgment.

One of them had been against the expansion into the sacred area until the end. They were treated as prisoners by the country despite also being royalty. The dragons were neither foolish nor stubborn enough to treat them as having committed the same crime.

Another had used their lineal magics to create an artificial landmass—the continent of Cendrillon—and had retreated there and remained completely uninvolved in the invasion. They had negotiated with the dragons after the war and, in exchange for vacating their created lands, gained a promise of mutual noninterference.

The final family had been living within the Jötunn's Commune at the time. The commune had been one of the few powers that had a contract with the White Empire. They also had an equal relationship with the dragons and so the dragons had been unable to reach those under the Jötunns' protection. They were not directly involved with the invasion, so the dragons tolerated them.

In the long years since that time, the world had gradually changed.

One after another, the intelligent dragons had vanished, their originally forbidden lands opening bit by bit to humans as well. The five, with both exceptional strength and a fondness for humans, had left a fang and claw apiece with the humans before they left.

The climate had changed simultaneously, with life as a whole mirroring it. The coniferous plants that had covered the land receded, and the large reptiles, along with other animals, found their habitats limited. The one exception was the continent Cendrillon, created through magic, which had its climate and soil forcibly maintained in the same state.

The intelligent dragons hid themselves away, and instead, the humanoids born from the five true dragons' fangs—the apostles—and those who held the weapons made from their claws—the champions—brought people together in the dragon faith.

“The descendants of those who gathered under the apostles and champions and took on their teachings are the church. Additionally, though the Demichev family—the tenth royal family—were imprisoned for their opposition to the invasion, they are now the Gilbelle Papacy. The Shulepov family—the fourth

royal family—were dependent on the Jötunn’s Commune of Utgardr and are said to have become our Sharou royal family.”

Once Lucretia Broglie’s long explanation wound down, silence reigned for a considerable time in the room. They were in a corner of the royal palace of Capua. Lucretia Broglie was the only speaker, and the only listeners were Queen Aura and Prince Consort Zenjirou. The discussion was completely secret from even their confidants, let alone their guards.

There had been a suggestion for the now-concubine of the family, Freya, to be present as well, but she was not for the time being. It was without a doubt information where the Northern Continent played a pivotal role, so it was something that should be shared with her. However, she was still not yet trusted enough to be invited.

“I had somewhat expected as much, but it goes against all sense. Frankly, it is rather hard to believe. Do you have any proof?” asked Aura.

Lucretia had likely expected the question from the queen. She therefore answered without hesitation. “Several of the Twin Kingdoms’s prized magic tools are heirlooms from the time of the White Empire.”

“And do any of them serve as evidence? Something which visibly proves it?”

Lucretia nodded.

“They do so visibly indeed. Almost all of them are collaborations between the Sharou—or rather, Shulepov—family and another of the royal families. For example, the Lulled Sea’s core is pure mana made via the Makarov family’s creation magic.”

Zenjirou was unable to hide his surprise when he heard that he had already seen the evidence in question. The statement brought to mind the pure-white sphere that made up the Lulled Sea’s core. It looked like some kind of globe. It was indeed blemish-free to an extent that made it hard to believe it was made of natural marble.

“And would those of the Northern Continent know it as such if they saw it?” Zenjirou pressed.

Lucretia considered that for a moment before answering. “Most people

probably would not. However, it would be best to assume that the descendants of the apostles and champions—the church’s core personnel—would.”

The apostles born from the true dragons’ fangs had been given a fragment of the true dragons’ wisdom. The champions, when they took up one of the weapons made from the dragons’ claws, would also inherit the knowledge. The apostles had all ceased their activity already, but the core of the church would have maintained the information to at least some extent.

“However, assuming all this is true, then surely the Sharou and Gilbelle families have no reason to clash with the true dragons?” asked Zenjirou. “There were agreements made at the time. So surely there would be no hostility between them and the church?”

It was a logical but naive perspective. In fact, it was not Lucretia who refuted him, but the queen at his side.

“In that case, Zenjirou, why did both families move to the Southern Continent?”

“Ah,” he replied in realization.

Lucretia offered her own agreement. “Your insight serves you well. As time degraded the apostles and the champions’ passing of knowledge grew less detailed, the church grew to see all of the descendants of the White Empire as ‘heretics who had raised their hands against the true dragons.’” The younger woman then spent even longer explaining what the church had lost.

“I see,” Aura replied after she had finished.

While her words were indicating understanding, she still had her doubts. Lucretia’s testimony alone was not enough to tell whether the history had been passed down correctly through the remnants of the empire to the Twin Kingdoms, or through the church. Even if the truth of the matter was as the Twin Kingdoms said, it was also possible that they had caused some other issue that had in turn caused their expulsion from the Northern Continent.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the church saw the White Empire as enemies, and the Twin Kingdoms were proud of their heritage from that country. If the nations of the Northern Continent continued to expand towards

the Southern Continent, even Zenjirou could see that a clash was inevitable despite his relative lack of knowledge in those matters.

A confrontation between the church and the descendants of the White Empire would not necessarily be limited to the Twin Kingdoms. Zenjirou also carried their blood, and Carlos Zenkichi carried not only their blood, but their magic as well.

Whether they wanted to be or not, the Twin Kingdoms and Capua were in the same boat here. Additionally, Capua was a seafaring nation with a long coastline, while the Twin Kingdoms was landlocked in the center of the continent. If the church acted, Capua would be in the firing line first.

“I ask you truly, Lucretia. Were you—no, were the leaders of the Twin Kingdoms who allowed your passage, at least those of the Sharou family—wary of the church from the beginning?”

Aura had gone past simply questioning into almost an interrogation, but Lucretia’s expression didn’t falter as she nodded.

“Yes. We only had the bare minimum of information, but we had heard that the church still had a lot of influence on the Northern Continent from Princess Freya.”

That would have been when Freya had visited the country. The king—then crown prince—must have obtained it in the course of his negotiations with her. They had heard about the Northern Continent’s rapid expansion in both technological and economic capabilities, in addition to their naval focus and the church remaining a major force. That was more than enough for the Twin Kingdoms, who knew themselves to have descended from the White Empire, to see the Northern Continent as a threat.

While pushing somewhat for Lucretia to accompany them on the *Glasis’s Leaf* was partially due to her own wishes, the leaders also had a vested interest in it. They wanted someone they could trust to gather information on the current state of the Northern Continent. At the same time, it also demonstrated that Lucretia—and therefore the Twin Kingdoms—were close to Zenjirou, so any conflict between the church and the White Empire’s remnants would involve Capua.

Aura did not hide her displeasure as she spoke. “We have no choice but to invite His Majesty Bruno here, then. Perhaps we should pass the word through Prince Francesco or Princess Bona?”

Both of them had Dual Burn Parchment, so they would be able to contact the Twin Kingdoms almost immediately. But Lucretia shook her head.

“I have a method of contact, so that is unnecessary. I would ask that you do not contact either of them. The request itself is not from me, however, but King Josep himself.”

“Hm.” Aura delayed her full response to put some pressure on the woman opposite her.

However, Lucretia kept her smiling front up and didn’t quiver in the slightest. As far as Aura had seen until now, Lucretia was able to socialize well and control her emotions as befitted a high-ranking noble, but she was not a diplomat with special training. If that impression was correct and she was either lying or bluffing, then Aura’s silent intimidation would have made it hard for the younger woman to hide it entirely.

Therefore, she could assume it was the truth, and the king did not want to involve Francesco or Bona in this. However, Lucretia’s tone was not particularly forceful, so she could not ask for something in exchange for keeping it private, and in turn, the request was not a completely firm demand. It was likely that involving one of them would simply cause more trouble, while they would neither gain nor lose anything vital.

“Very well, I will not involve either of Their Highnesses. I shall be relying on you to contact your homeland,” Aura told her.

“Understood, Your Majesty,” Lucretia answered, her relief prompting the first honest smile of the day from her.

Chapter 1 — Concubine Debut

Zenjirou and Freya's wedding had taken place in Uppasala, and there would not be another in Capua. Instead, there would be an evening event led by the two of them to allow Freya to debut in her new position.

The event was held within the palace's main hall. Chandeliers hanging from the tall ceiling, along with the regularly spaced candles, pushed back the darkness of the night from the area Zenjirou and Freya walked through, arm in arm.

Zenjirou often wore the third uniform—a traditional outfit for the Capuan royal family—for his appearances. Today, however, he was wearing something akin to a tuxedo. It was for no other reason than to match his partner, Freya.

The princess, for her part, was wearing a red dress—the emblematic color of the Capuan royal family. Zenjirou's tuxedo was also red-themed.

She had worn a red dress before when her becoming a concubine was all but assured, but this was the first time she'd been in public as a member of the royal family wearing red. While it was an event held by the royal family, it was also practically a marriage ceremony, so even those of inferior standing could strike up a conversation with the two of them as long as it was to offer their congratulations on the wedding.

The nobles actively formed a line in order to meet with the royal family.

"Sir Zenjirou, Lady Freya, I offer my congratulations on your wedding."

"Thank you, Lord Tomas."

"Indeed, thank you."

Zenjirou and Freya replied in turn, still with their arms linked and smiles on their faces. Zenjirou was paying more attention to his words and expressions than he had done since working in Japan. While he was somewhat used to his duties as royalty, Freya was still a step or two ahead in that respect. His current smile could not match a true, natural smile from him, but Freya's was even

more charming than her real smiles. That in itself was likely due to the practice required on a regular basis to put forth a charming persona.

While he was also more used to this kind of event than before, there was still a certain factor he had to keep in mind: his partner tonight was Freya, not Aura.

Queen Aura and Prince Consort Zenjirou had to manage the fine line of an “equal” relationship, but with Freya, Zenjirou had to act as her superior. While it was less difficult, behaving differently than normal meant a different mindset. If he didn’t keep reminding himself, he’d start acting like her equal just like with Aura. He had learned how to act as a royal over the past few years, but he was still a commoner at his core. If he didn’t keep his mind focused, that would be on full display.

Still, he managed to make it through the various congratulations to a break in the deluge. His eyes then stopped on another person. It was a man wearing blue clothing, with pale brown hair, gray eyes, and pale white skin. The lighter coloration made him stand out against the darker-skinned-and-haired Capuans.

Zenjirou indicated the man to Freya with a glance, and they set off towards him.

“Lord Frederic, my apologies for the delayed greeting.”

“Not at all,” the blue-clad man—Frederic Aslund—replied with a smile. “Thank you for your invitation to this auspicious event, Your Majesty.”

The man was a diplomat from Uppasala. Zenjirou had brought him to the country a little after Freya to serve as a conduit to the other kingdom. He was a well-trusted subordinate of the current king, Gustav V. His residence in Capua meant that he could be said to have the alliance itself resting on him.

In truth, Zenjirou was the method by which the diplomat could move between his homeland and Capua. Additionally, Zenjirou had been back to Uppasala on several occasions for “forgotten items” at Freya’s and her head maid’s requests, so he was the most frequent traveler between both nations by far.

Taken to the extreme, if a request or question exceeded what Aslund could deal with and he had to answer, “I will contact my homeland,” it would be

faster for Zenjirou to teleport to Uppasala and directly request an audience with Gustav than to have Aslund do the same. In the latter case, Zenjirou would still have to go to bring him back, so it would just add another step to the process.

It was the blazing season on the Southern Continent and summer on the Northern Continent. Despite being technically in the same season, Capua could easily break forty degrees while Uppasala could feasibly drop below ten. Zenjirou was therefore repeatedly going between the two extremes and finding it quite the burden. The one silver lining was that despite the large difference in latitude, the longitudinal difference was not so extreme. Adding a huge time zone difference to the temperature difference would doubtlessly see him collapsing.

Of course, in that respect it would potentially be an even bigger problem for both countries' diplomats, who had been placed on completely different continents for the first time in their lives.

"Have you found any difficulties with living here?" Zenjirou asked. "If you have then I urge you to say so. While I cannot guarantee we can solve everything, we will do what we can."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. To be blunt, the heat astounded me at first. However, thanks to the magic tool you provided, we are coping at present," the man from the far north replied, sounding almost like he was whining.

The mist-generating magic tools lessened the oppression of the heat. In the same way that several of them had been bought for Freya and her maids, Capua had bought another to provide the diplomat with. If not, the blazing season, which saw nighttime temperatures over thirty-five degrees, would be unbearable for those from the Northern Continent.

Zenjirou then had the man write a letter in his own words that could be used for negotiating with the upper echelons of Uppasala. Effectively, he used it to say that in the same way Uppasalans could not make it through the blazing season of Capua, the Capuans would not make it through the winter of Uppasala—at least not without help in both cases.

Adding the diplomat's "complaints" to underscore this point meant that Gustav could well understand the severity of what was being said. Zenjirou had

been born in a village near a famous ski resort, so he had some resistance to both the winter's chill and the snow. Even so, spring in Uppasala had felt like the depths of winter to him. For someone from Capua, who was utterly unaware of both, the Uppasalan winter would break them very literally, in both a physical and mental sense.

The conversation between him and the diplomat went well after that, and suddenly Zenjirou found himself remembering a discussion from Uppasala.

“Now that I think about it, how did it progress? I had heard there was an unexpected addition to the *Glasisir's Leaf*.”

A shadow passed over the other man's face.

“Indeed. While I cannot say for certain yet, I have to conclude that the possibility is high. Therefore when the ship arrives, we would like to arrange for you to send said person back.”

Things had started around when the *Glasisir's Leaf* had headed back out to sea. However, it had taken another five days for things to become clear.

A professor in the capital's university had vanished. They were an authority on natural science and extremely proactive, often disappearing for fieldwork without a word to anyone else. Therefore, people had just assumed it was the same as always. After a full five days, though, unease began to creep in.

Just in case, the university had sent someone after the professor, who had obtained confirmation that the professor had been seen boarding the ferry to the *Glasisir's Leaf* with the other sailors on the Mater Lake.

Despite their fear, they had reported it to the palace and sent the palace into an uproar. At this point, several things came to mind. Freya had shown some of the plant samples from Capua to one of the professors who was a particular authority on botany. They had exclaimed that it was impossible and their knowledge could not explain the plants' growth. They had even mentioned desperately wanting to see where they grew, and despite how long it had been, the king had found that coming back to mind.

With that, it was easy to assume what had happened. Professors at the university had their positions assured by the king—rather elevated positions, at

that. The professor in question was well-known for their penchant for fieldwork. They had frequently joined seal-fishing expeditions and reindeer hunts, which had been primarily recognized by the country. Gustav could easily see the *Glafir's Leaf's* captain and other sailors accepting such a request.

Zenjirou—who traveled between both continents frequently via teleportation—had also heard this sequence of events.

“From what I understand, they are quite the important figure. Neither I nor Her Majesty would refuse a request to teleport them back.”

Naturally, it would not be free, but Uppasala was neither so tight with their money nor unintelligent as to realize that. However, it was not the diplomat who responded to his statement, but the woman with her arm through his.

“Sir Zenjirou, that is impossible. There are a limited number of people from our country who know of the existence of the spell.”

“Ah, I see,” Zenjirou said in immediate realization.

While in Capua it was a widely known fact that he could cast teleportation, the same was not true in Uppasala. They were not specifically hiding it, but they were also not actively spreading the truth of the matter, so most of the country was unaware.

“Well then, we shall pray that the ship safely arrives in Valentia, along with that professor. Ah, what was their name?”

Zenjirou could not immediately name the professor and stalled. The diplomat picked up the conversation with a smile.

“Petr. Professor Petr Rinne, Your Majesty. I hope you can help despite the efforts it will likely take.”



With the debut over without incident, Zenjirou and Freya returned to the inner palace.

Heading back after finishing work in the royal palace was normal for him; however, this was not the familiar main building, but an annex.

He was currently in its living room. Instead of LED floor lamps, static balls of

flame lit the room. Instead of ice and a fan, mist generators kept the temperature down. While it was unquestionably a step removed in comfort compared to the main building, the feeling of liberation from the event still let Zenjirou relax on the sofa.

After getting back, he'd changed out of the tuxedo-like clothing into a T-shirt and loose pants. He was not wearing shoes, or even socks, and yet the lesser sense of relaxation was because it didn't yet feel like home to him.

"Thank you for tonight," he said to Freya. "Are you tired yet?"

While there was more than enough consideration in his question, there was still a sense of distance. It was not how he would interact by default, as he would if he was talking to Aura.

"Thank you, Sir Zenjirou. I am still fine. I have trained as both a soldier and a captain to work at night, so I have stamina to spare," she said with a smile.

"I see. I should expect nothing else."

"Although, speaking of, I notice you do not seem tired either, despite the late hour. And, well, I apologize for the rudeness but you also don't seem like you have had the same kind of training," she commented somewhat awkwardly.

"I haven't. Rather than training, it came from practical experience," he said, huffing a laugh at the memories of that "practical experience."

It was barely past nine at night. Whether he compared it to his time at work where he was lucky to make the last train home, or when his friends kept him hanging out all night before heading to their lectures, or when school forced him into studying through the night, it was still too early to head to bed.

"Is that so? I would like to hear about that if the opportunity arises. I do have to say that with the debut over, I feel rather relieved."

"You're right. We can finally relax somewhat." As the word "relax" left his mouth, Zenjirou noticed his own tone. "I mean, yeah, we can chill," he rephrased somewhat guiltily.

Freya's smile took on a teasing edge. "Thank you," she giggled. "I've finally been able to hear how you would normally speak."

Zenjirou had promised her that he'd speak as naturally as possible while in the inner palace, but he had not kept that promise particularly well. He found himself usually slipping into his more formal mannerisms. While he really did intend to follow through, he was not adaptable enough that he could immediately break this habit of over a year.

"Sorry, it's kinda hard to switch immediately. Anyway, speaking of tonight, do you know what kind of person this Professor Rinne is?"

Freya considered the question for a moment before shaking her head. "Unfortunately not. I have at least heard his name as an exceptionally distinguished natural scientist, though."

"I see. That's a shame."

"Oh, though if you wish to know more, Völundr should have information."

"He should?" Zenjirou asked in surprise, not expecting that name to come up.

"Völundr" was the name given to a distinguished smith in Uppasala. It was hard to imagine the man having links to a professor from the university.

Freya probably saw where his thoughts were going. "The professor specializes in natural sciences. While his specific specialism is in botany, mineralogy also falls within the natural sciences. So much so that the general view of things is that if you are looking for a rare mineral, you should ask him. I have heard that when Völundr wants more special minerals, he sends an apprentice with the professor on his fieldwork."

"I see. Then perhaps I'll ask him if he has the time."

The smith had immediately set about working with the craftsman's garden on his arrival. In place of any greeting, he had used the tools and materials Capua possessed to forge a splendid sword.

While craftsmen could be somewhat exclusionary, skill could speak louder than anything, and Völundr's overwhelming skill had immediately forged his place among the other craftsmen.

Of course, despite the Capuan craftsmen's reactions, the man who held the title of Völundr was not happy with the blade he had formed. Unfortunately,

the furnaces Capua had were inferior to Uppasala's and the ingots they smelted were not good enough for him. While there was abundant firewood, the charcoal made from it was not of particularly high quality.

More important than any of that, though, was that the temperature and humidity were too different. That meant that using the furnaces in the same way he would in Uppasala would not offer the same results. It would take some trial and error to tweak the process.

Völundr had offered a fierce grin in regard to that and seen the entire endeavor as worthwhile.

"I'm finding my expectations climbing for Uppasala's craftsmen," Zenjirou commented.

"Völundr will likely live up to them," Freya answered proudly before adding a warning as well. "However, expecting the same of the others will see you disappointed."

The majority of craftsmen were aboard the *Glafir's Leaf*, but a few who were called "master" or seen as leading individuals had been transported to Capua by way of Zenjirou's spell and were already in the palace. They were people who drew up plans for ports, or could lead the construction of ships akin to the *Glafir's Leaf*, or knew how to build furnaces. Each of them were skilled in their own right, but none stood head and shoulders above the rest in their field like Völundr.

Different specializations aside, expecting the same kind of output from them would be too harsh.

"Huh, so Völundr is special, then."

"Indeed, hence being *Völundr*." Freya was extremely proud as she answered.

Still, in terms of their importance, none of the other craftsmen were inferior to him. With Freya and Zenjirou's marriage being a political one, Capua's greatest expectations centered on economic stimulus from intercontinental trade. In that respect, people who could lead the construction of ships and ports were perhaps even more important than Völundr.

"Speaking of, you're negotiating with Aura about the port and shipyard, right?"

How's that going?" Zenjirou asked lightly.

Freya's reaction was considerably worse than he had expected. "Slowly..."

Her pleasant expression vanished into a sigh as she voiced her grievances.

"Well..."

With negotiations between the two of them, Zenjirou was obviously in a position where he could not really support either of them, so he couldn't just wish her luck. Apparently understanding that, Freya didn't wait for him to formulate an answer and just continued venting.

"Her Majesty is the monarch of a large country. It might therefore make sense for me to not be her equal at the negotiating table, but she truly, *truly* is making things difficult. I have to agree that prioritizing a dock to repair the *Glasir's Leaf* is more important, but ensuring that it can also *construct* a similar ship or situating it in Valentia will end up with all of the trade focusing there. At this rate, Alcott will just be a fishing village for the foreseeable future."

She then slumped where she sat. In addition to being his concubine, Freya also had the title of Duchess Alcott, as their initial negotiations had decided. It was the same rank that Zenjirou had as Duke Bilbo, but unlike his position, it also came with land.

The Alcott duchy was currently uninhabited, but it was well suited to becoming a decent port. Freya had already had her own specialists confirm that. However, even a country of Capua's stature would find it a burden on their treasury to immediately build a port town, particularly when it was internal to the royal family, so it was, strictly speaking, not a national project.

With that in mind, Alcott would only be developed once the preexisting port in Valentia could be used to discharge their contractual obligations in providing sister ships for the *Glasir's Leaf*.

"If things go poorly, Alcott will be completely postponed until Valentia has already constructed a ship..." she murmured, respect for Aura making its way into her voice.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you. Yeah, I actually can't say anything in my position, but you've got my sympathy," Zenjirou said, doing his best to console

her even as he picked his words.

With Freya and Aura having their goals at odds, Zenjirou was on Aura's side both politically and emotionally, so even this neutrality was actually quite the concession to Freya.

While they spoke, a pale maid with a dignified air informed them that the sauna was ready.

"Shall we, then?" Zenjirou asked, rising first.

"Indeed," Freya replied, taking his offered hand as he escorted her towards the sauna.

Usually with saunas, one would alternate between it and a cold bath. You would use the sauna itself to heat yourself and work up a sweat along with flushing out any toxins, then you would cool yourself back down with cold water. However, the circumstances were a little different during the blazing season in Capua. After all, day or night, the climate was on the same level as a sauna—albeit a somewhat anemic one. It ended up feeling like you were spending the whole day in a sauna.

Therefore, with towels wrapped around their naked bodies, Zenjirou and Freya dipped themselves into the cold bath *first*.

"Phew..."

"Hah..."

The cool water was so pleasant that both of them couldn't help but let out sighs of satisfaction.

Initially, it had just been set up to be filled with cold water, but Freya's advice had led to it being adjusted so the water supply and drain were both slightly open to create a constant flow. The running water also dropped the temperature a little, but the most important thing was that it would simply take the heat from your body and then carry it away. So subjectively, it felt even cooler.

In Capua—and indeed in Uppasala itself—there was no cloth that really worked as a towel, so they were just wrapped in relatively thick cloths, which

clung to their bodies with the cold water. Freya's pale skin was cast in a red glow from the static flame.

With Aura, Zenjirou was fairly used to sharing a bath even completely nude, but with Freya, he was still somewhat unsure exactly where he should look. He definitely felt like he shouldn't outright stare, but being at least technically married, he also felt awkward looking away entirely. Therefore, Zenjirou kept his gaze mostly on her face rather than her body as he talked to her.

"You have lived here for a reasonable time now, so have you found any problems with the lifestyle?"

The question was clearly to fill the silence, but Freya answered it properly.

"Well, while I am at least somewhat used to things now, of course, I must admit to there still being differences that are hard to get used to. The biggest thing would have to be the lack of dairy products."

While in Capua, dairy products practically didn't exist, it was rarer for there to be a day when one *didn't* have a dairy product in Uppasala. Before she had married Zenjirou, Freya had lived in Capua for over a year, but she had also had access to the goats on the *Glasis's Leaf* at that point, so she could access—an admittedly limited supply of—dairy products. Furthermore, despite the length of time, she had still felt like she was a guest and was only there temporarily, so restraining her desires had been less of an issue.

Now that she was officially wedded to Zenjirou, though, the realization that her current lifestyle would fundamentally be how she spent the rest of her life made that tolerance harder. The lack of dairy products was the most obvious example of such things.

"Hmm, Nicolai is working hard at it, so there's more than there was," Zenjirou replied. "We've got access to cream as well as just cheese and yogurt now."

Nicolai was the name of a former sailor on the *Glasis's Leaf* who had been assigned to the care of the goats Freya had given Zenjirou. His skills were impressive. Not only had he lost very few of the goats to the very different climate and vegetation of the Southern Continent, he'd also succeeded in breeding them and getting relatively palatable dairy products from them.

However, that was still not enough for a stable supply according to Zenjirou and Freya. While the flavor was there, they were still evaluating how to rear and feed the livestock in Capua, while prioritizing increasing their numbers more than anything. The milk was mainly going to the kids rather than the humans, so there was certainly not a glut of dairy products available.

“I am still visiting Uppasala roughly once a month, so perhaps I should purchase some goats there?” Zenjirou suggested.

Freya’s face shone with temptation for a moment at the alluring suggestion before her calmness prevailed and she shook her head. “I appreciate the thought, but that won’t work. The goats we brought with us were from more southern countries rather than Uppasala.”

While goats were remarkably resilient to differences in environment and diet, there were still limits. The ones on board the ship were those who had lived in the southernmost regions of the Northern Continent. That was why they were managing to adapt to Capua. Expecting the same of goats from Uppasala would be excessive.

“Ah, that would be difficult. The only place I can get to on the continent is Uppasala, after all.”

While the continent was not distant in the usual sense since Zenjirou could teleport, he could not teleport just anywhere. He still had the crutch of his camera, so he could only visit places he had photographed. There was also the issue of safety, so the only place he could practically teleport was the Capuan embassy in Uppasala.

“While I’d love to add more places to the list, the first ones would have to be the commonwealth or Bohevia,” he muttered.

The Noble’s Commonwealth of Złota Wolność—commonly known as simply “the commonwealth”—was the biggest and strongest state in the west of the Northern Continent, and a country they had to be the most wary of due to its links to the White Empire. Bohevia, however, was home to the glass workshop he had received a letter of introduction to from Priest Yan.

Those were the places he should be prioritizing when widening the locations he could teleport to. Of course, Zenjirou was the prince consort of Capua, so

using teleportation to enter the other country without permission could cause far greater problems down the line, and it was essentially forbidden.

“What about everything else? Have you gotten used to the heat?”

Freya hesitated for a moment before deciding that it would be better to openly admit to things than to try and bluff. “Skaji and I are fine with the heat. After all, we have spent more than a year here and we can shut ourselves away with the magic tools when we have no business outside. The issue is the maids we brought with us. They are all doing their best but are honestly flagging a fair amount.”

The maids’ sleeping quarters similarly had a magic tool to create a cooling mist. However, they could obviously not spend all their time there, and there were no such luxuries while they were on duty. Freya was assigning them to the living room—which *did* have such a tool—as much as she could, but to do so excessively would be blatant favoritism. A slightly more favorable treatment for the maids from her homeland was one thing, but treating them and the Capuan maids differently would mean Freya would never *truly* be the annex’s lady. To put things in extreme terms, Freya was currently building her own “stronghold” within Capua’s inner palace. She could not afford dissent in her ranks.

“I guess I get that. Honestly, I’m not entirely used to it either. Maybe we could add more maids from Uppasala as a relief force?”

The suggestion was once more only possible due to Zenjirou’s teleportation ability, but Freya again shook her head.

“I appreciate the offer, but that would be tricky for the time being. There are many female royals and nobles of at least comparable rank, so maids who can serve them are in high demand. Additionally, there would be...conditions...on any that I could bring here.”

Her tone darkened as she finished her statement. First of the conditions would be—naturally—that they had firm loyalty to either Freya or Uppasala. The second would be that they were able to withstand the fiendish temperature of the Southern Continent. Finally, that they not look down on the people of the Southern Continent.

The darkening of Freya’s tone was due to that third condition. The people of

the Northern Continent had a strong tendency to regard those of the Southern Continent as inferior. While that was less the case in the animistic countries of the north, it was still there. The people who didn't have such a tendency—or could at least keep it from their words and actions—were rather limited in number.

“Then I guess they'll just have to do their best to get used to things as they are. If they start to *really* struggle then we can let them return temporarily to Uppasala in turn. Your people should be able to cover for at least one person at a time for a short period, right?”

“Indeed, that is not a problem. The maids that Her Majesty provided from Capua are extremely skilled. I would prefer to avoid those measures needing to be taken, though.”

Her statement was out of consideration for the maids. If they were unable to fulfill their duties in full and instead needed to return home temporarily, their careers would suffer greatly. Of course, that was preferable to them collapsing, but she would rather not harm their futures if possible.

“That makes sense. The only other thing I can think of is changing their clothes, I guess.”

“Their clothes?” Freya asked, blue eyes blinking in surprise.

Zenjirou offered his new wife a nod. “Yeah. While we were in the commonwealth, the maids bought several types of cloth, so using them to make uniforms might make things different.”

Considering their quality, the amount sold, and the prices, it seemed that the Northern Continent was unfortunately a literal cut above the Southern Continent in terms of textiles and clothing.

There was a huge variety in color and pattern, as well as in the base cloths themselves. Among them were fabrics that felt cool to the touch. It would be a minor improvement at best, but using one to make uniforms might help a little.

“Uppasala has such cloth as well, to a certain extent, at least. I imagine our tailors are more familiar with using it, so perhaps we could have Uppasala handle that?”

“Your tailors might be more used to the cloth, but it’ll be for maid uniforms, so I feel like ours would be more used to that?” Zenjirou half-asked, immersed in the water up to his neck.

“That is true, but if they are made in Uppasala, then the maids will be able to go back temporarily as well,” Freya answered.

Returning to their homeland with a *reason* wouldn’t blemish their careers, while also being a welcome break to the maids suffering through the heat. Zenjirou could see where she was coming from.

“Ah, I get you. That’s worth considering, then. It would mean needing to cast the spell for each of them, so it’ll get postponed for a while. It might not even be possible before the season hits its peak.”

If it was just taking the cloth, then Zenjirou could go round trip himself. If he had to send the maids and have the cloth tailored, he would have to stay for the same number of days as there were maids. Zenjirou could only use the spell twice a day, and at present, he simply didn’t have that much free time.

Freya’s face screwed up in a self-recriminating scowl as she slowly sank into the water.

“Freya?” Zenjirou said worriedly as her silvery-blue hair drifted in the water above her head. Fortunately, though, his worry didn’t last for long.

“Phwah!”



“F-Freya?”

Once she’d stood from the water, arcing through the air like a breaching dolphin, Freya wiped the water from her face with her hands before brushing the hair out of her eyes and taking her original seat.

“Phew, I have cooled off a little now,” she said before looking directly at him. “Sir Zenjirou?”

“Yes?” he replied, reflexively straightening as she did the same.

“My apologies,” she said. While she didn’t bow her head, her gaze dropped slightly, making the earnestness of her apology apparent.

Zenjirou couldn’t hide his confusion. What had happened that had made his second wife need to apologize?

“Uh...”

Freya’s eyes drifted slightly closed as if looking at something bright. “Have you not realized? My suggestion was immensely rude. It would have restricted you for several days. As your concubine, it was an extreme request. One might even say excessively so.”

“Oh, right.”

That made sense now. Zenjirou was the prince consort. And even if he wasn’t, he was the only one who could teleport himself to other places. Although Aura could send people, she could not really go herself since she needed to remain in Capua. Freya requesting several days of Zenjirou’s time for the task was beyond what a concubine should request while sharing a bed—or bath, in this case.

“Sorry, that wasn’t something I could really promise on my own,” he said, scratching his head in apology.

And he was indeed apologetic. This kind of conversation would have been okay with Aura. A discussion between the two of them was akin to an informal supreme council with a bare minimum of people. Either one could propose whatever they liked, and if the other accepted it, no one else would truly be able to object.

That was not the case with Freya, though. She was nothing more than

Zenjirou's concubine. Even if he was willing to accept her suggestion, the final decision would fall to Aura, and even more importantly, continuing to make decisions based on his concubine's requests would lead to pressure from other nobles.

"Not at all. It was my mistake. I should have considered it more carefully," Freya said.

"Yeah, well, let's say it's on both of us. Now that I think about it, though, why did you even make a suggestion like that?"

The question was warranted. She had voluntarily admitted to the attempted trickery, and far too quickly to call it a careless mistake. She looked away awkwardly.

"I'm sorry. It is a habit to start with a suggestion that won't be accepted," she admitted quietly.

Until now, her suggestions and requests had generally been refused. In that respect, she was both the victim and perpetrator, and her parents were equally victims—if not more so. "I want to learn swordplay," "I want to row a boat," "I want to hunt a boar," or "I want to go fishing." All the things she wanted to do or have were repeatedly refused.

However, she wasn't deterred and instead repeatedly kept it up. When she was young, she'd cry to get her way. As she grew older, she started to just slip out and do what she wanted. When she came of age, she kept up whatever negotiations she had to until her desires were fulfilled.

Although it would have been hard for Freya, it was likely even harder for her parents. Regardless, Freya knew that was what her negotiation with her family was. It had therefore led to the habit of opening up with a completely ridiculous request she never thought would be accepted.

Once she finished explaining all of that, Zenjirou found himself laughing.

"Yeah, that doesn't really work with me."

"So it seems," she said, following suit.

Zenjirou generally tried to grant the requests from those close to him as much

as he could. Of course, he wouldn't accept things that were completely impossible or excessively selfish, but that didn't change his fundamental stance.

It resulted in Freya asking for the most she could, even if it was ludicrous, while Zenjirou tried to do all that he could to make it a reality. Although Freya would gain in the short term, it was clear that it would just lead to ruin in the long term.

Aura was not so generous that she would allow a concubine to remain in the inner palace if said concubine repeatedly overstepped her bounds to ask for favors.

"We'll have to think about it all seriously," Zenjirou commented.

"We will. First of all, I need to change how I consider things."

Negotiating with Zenjirou wasn't necessary. Instead, she would need to discuss things with him. These events had made that very clear to her.

"Yeah, I'll be careful too. I'm getting pretty cold now, though. Let's head to the sauna," he said, standing up and holding his hand out.

"Let's."

Freya took his hand and stood with him. They were clad only in a single swath of fabric apiece as Zenjirou led the way. As their wet feet left wet prints on the stone floor, Freya suddenly remembered some of the earlier conversation.

"Sir Zenjirou? You said it would be *postponed*, so do you already have plans?"

"Oh, yeah. In the Twin Kingdoms. It could take quite a while," he answered.

For once, his displeasure was clearly visible on his face.



Meanwhile, Aura was spending the night alone in her bedroom in the main building. She lay silently on the large bed, wearing thin nightclothes. The AC was running. It was the blazing season, and what should have been comfortable felt almost cold to her. She rolled over on the bed and curled up lying almost like a child. Still, she soon rolled back again.

It wasn't rare for her to sleep alone. She spent a lot of time alone when

Zenjirou was in Valentia, the Gaziel March, the Twin Kingdoms, or even traveling to the Northern Continent. None of them had felt like this night did, though. Zenjirou was here, a few minutes' walk away, if that. With another woman.

The queen put her right hand over her face as she lay on her back, letting out a sigh.

"This is...depressing."

She couldn't sleep. If she didn't do anything, she'd simply start thinking about him.

"I thought I was a more decisive person than this," she mused wryly to herself as she switched the lights on. In the white light from the LEDs, the queen stood and picked up several sheets of drake parchment from the desk and took them back to her bed. Since she couldn't sleep, she decided to get some work done instead. It was rather disgraceful behavior in some ways that she would never show her husband.

The drake parchment held recent and important information in her own hand. With her legs stretched out over the wide bed and her back supported somewhat by pillows, she perused the document. It contained information on the current conditions on the Northern Continent along with photos from the camera. There were also notes on Lucretia's revelations about the White Empire and the Twin Kingdoms's connection to it, along with plans for secret meetings with the former king.

Additionally—and perhaps conveniently—there was an official request from Margarita to visit after she had heard of Völundr's arrival in Capua. There was also, naturally, a request to use Zenjirou's teleportation for both legs of the journey.

She had said it was urgent and that if she could not pay in money, she was willing to create a magic tool in exchange, so she was clearly deadly serious.

Zenjirou would teleport to the Twin Kingdoms and send Margarita from there. However, even a princess could not travel alone, despite her personally saying that she would do so if necessary. That meant that Zenjirou would be in the Twin Kingdoms for several days, sending a single person each day. Bruno would

be included in their number. Doing things that way would minimize the number of people in both countries who were aware of it.

This would inevitably lead to the princess becoming aware of the secret meetings, but it shouldn't be hard to obtain her silence. Margarita was uninterested in politics to begin with, entirely focused on the royal family's craft. She was also tight-lipped. With the Northern Continent blacksmith dangling in front of her, her originally lacking interest in politics was practically nonexistent.

Aura spoke aloud to gather her thoughts. "We are producing a small number of marbles now. With Sir Völundr's assistance, we may be able to prevent the furnaces from burning out, which would increase the quantity. If we can get someone from the Northern Continent who works with glass, we can likely improve the quality."

The queen closed her eyes in thought.

The marbles' value was solely in their suitability as a medium for enchanting. Therefore, they could not keep their production a secret from the Twin Kingdoms—or more accurately, from the Sharou family. They were the only ones capable of enchanting, and therefore the only ones capable of making use of the marbles. Hiding their existence from the family would just make them a waste of resources. While Capua should also focus on creating enchanters of their own from Zenjirou's bloodline, that was not relevant now. At the earliest—if everything went perfectly—it would be the next generation.

Of course, the *method* for their creation would have to be kept secret, and she had no intention of revealing their capacity for production either.

"In which case, giving Princess Margarita one or several will not be an issue. At the very least, it should not become a problem."

The princess was an enchanter on the same elevated level as Francesco. Having someone of her skill create a magic tool would be worth far more than mere money.

"Of course, that point of view may well change before long," she commented to herself before shuddering.

Francesco had recently reported the magic tool for enchanting water-creating magic tools was complete. While she had not seen the tool itself, Francesco had seemed over the moon, so it was likely the truth.

A magic tool that created other magic tools, and the creation of marbles, which drastically increased the speed of creation... Incomplete or not, both of them now existing could quite possibly lead to magic tools no longer being a treasure far out of her grasp. Magic tools would be mass-producible. That would, in turn, lead to a drastic change on the Southern Continent. If she spoke in only emotional terms, she was scared of that acceleration. She would prefer that the expansion moved slowly while seeing how people reacted.

While many misunderstood, Aura was conservative at heart. She didn't like sudden, drastic change. However, a conservative politician clinging stubbornly to the status quo was pointless. Other changes that allowed her to maintain the status quo would be permitted. For Aura, as a queen, the highest priorities would be Capua's position as the leading power in the western region of the Southern Continent, and the royal family's position as the true rulers of that country.

Size and influence of a country were relative things. If her country focused on maintaining its current circumstances while its neighbors built up their power, they would go from powerful to average, and then slip from average to weak.

To prevent that from happening, they had to continue with things that would strengthen the country.

Ordinarily, that could be accomplished steadily with smaller changes such as an increase in population or farmland. However, there were times when that was not enough. Aura was currently staring down just one of those times, possibly in the very near future.

"We cannot overlook this," she said as her eyes fell on a single sheet of paper mixed in with the parchment.

Some of the scarce leftover ink had been used to print images from the camera on the sheet. One was a shot of the biggest port of Złota Wolność, their pride and joy: Pomorskie. The photo was from an elevated location. White walls and red roofs lined the streets of the town. The people walking through the

town were wearing refined clothes, and the port itself was absolutely massive and clearly well maintained.

The Southern Continent didn't have the like of it. A port of this size was more than enough to prompt wariness from her. Even Valentia, *Capua's* pride and joy was only slightly comparable in size, but that was due to the king who had ordered its construction over-preparing for the future.

Parts of it were not used at all, and the larger area the soldiers needed to patrol simply made portions of it a burden. The deeply excavated areas not used for ships to moor could attract dangerous sea drakes as well. However, that made it relatively simple to create a shipyard suitable for ships of the *Glasis's Leaf's* size, so the former king's decision had likely been the correct one.

However, it was still a fact that its size was more than Capua could currently keep in service. In comparison, Pomorskie had an even bigger port and was host to so many ships that it seemed small in comparison.

"Technology was a given, but it would seem we fall far behind economically as well. Considering the war, perhaps in population too?" Aura mused.

According to what Zenjirou had heard from Freya, the commonwealth had at least five ships on the same level as the *Glasis's Leaf*. The commonwealth, as well as the other powerful countries on the continent, were developing their naval trade. Aura would not be surprised in the slightest if in the not-too-distant future, two ships of the same class as the *Glasis's Leaf* showed up on the Southern Continent for trade.

"In which case, somewhat risky or not, we will have to hasten our own growth. The increase of marbles and therefore magic tools is the quickest way to do so."

Of course, the risks were great. While only the Sharou family could create magic tools, anyone could make marbles if they knew how. In the worst case, once the Twin Kingdoms knew how to create them, they could just start sweeping across the continent without even waiting for the Northern Continent's invasion. However, it was impossible to avoid all risks when running a country. As its queen, Aura had decided to accept those risks.

While her thoughts as the country's monarch ran through her head, she

found herself assailed by an intense fatigue. If she didn't sleep now, she'd find her thoughts drawn to her husband in the annex again.

"To bed, then," Aura said, all too aware of that. She put the parchment and paper on her bedside table and turned off the lights before closing her eyes.

Chapter 2 — Visit to the Twin Kingdoms

Several days later, Zenjirou arrived in the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle via teleportation. The country was on the Southern Continent, so it was also in the middle of the blazing season. However, while the temperature might be the same, it felt rather different due to the humidity in Capua being over 90% and it being less than 10% there.

As Zenjirou breathed in the hot—though more comfortable—air, Margarita of the Sharou family greeted him.

“Welcome, Your Majesty. I thank you deeply for this opportunity to visit Sir Völundr!”

Her dry blonde hair was tied together just neatly enough to be rude, and her originally beautiful blue eyes were now mismatched, her right eye a milky white. Her dress was also as simple as she could get away with. The woman saw dressing up as nothing more than a duty expected of her as a royal.

Zenjirou took half a step back at the princess’s excitement exceeding anything he remembered from her. “O-Of course, Princess Margarita. Thank you for your welcome.”

Indeed, the public reason for his presence in the Twin Kingdoms was Margarita’s request. However, the request was to visit *Capua*, not Smith Völundr, and Aura’s acceptance was to hide Bruno’s secret visit.

Seeing Margarita completely ignore the technicalities of the situation and outright state her own desires made Zenjirou all too aware of why she was considered to be on the same level as Francesco.

“Allow us to show you to your room, Sir Zenjirou,” Eladio—the commander of the Capuan forces stationed in the Twin Kingdoms—urged, seeming to realize the situation wouldn’t go anywhere as things were with the princess looking intensely at Zenjirou as if she wanted him to send her to Capua at this very moment.

That prompted even Margarita to realize her impropriety as she looked chagrined for a moment before apologizing. “Pardon me, Your Majesty.”

“Not at all. I had heard about your personality from both Princess Bona and Prince Francesco, so I must admit I was less surprised by your first statement,” he said, mocking her ever so slightly.

“I find that rather hard to refute,” she laughed, ignoring politeness again as she followed him.

As Zenjirou left the arrival room, he suddenly remembered that the magic tool around his wrist had been given to him by Margarita.

“Incidentally, Princess Margarita, I have to say that this Windhammer was exceptionally useful, so you have my thanks. I would like to repay you for it in some form. Is there anything you would request?”

The woman’s mismatched eyes gleamed with delight as she walked alongside him.

“That was an offering from me because you listened to my selfishness,” she said, “so I consider it already paid for.”

When she had given it to him, she had sought only one thing as recompense. Namely, to accept at least three of her younger sister’s invitations. By his reckoning, only one remained.

“While I have kept to that promise, I still thought it worth further thanks,” he said.

Those were his true feelings. In fact, without the Windhammer, it would have likely been impossible for him to pass the Rite of Age in Uppasala. Without the Rite of Age, marrying Freya would have been...actually, surprisingly possible, but it was not hard to imagine the leading classes of the country putting up much more of a fight.

“In which case, perhaps you could tell me how it went? I improved the Windhammer itself on my own, and this is the first time it has been used by someone who—pardon my rudeness—has no combat ability of their own. I would like nothing more than your unvarnished impressions to better improve it in the future. Oh, if possible, I would also like you to write it down.”

“Very well,” Zenjirou replied, unable to hide a smile as the princess’s voice got faster and faster. “I shall send you my notes at a later date.”



For Zenjirou, this was at least technically an official state visit, despite the main purposes of it being to (publicly) teleport Margarita and (clandestinely) teleport Bruno.

As a royal from a country of Capua’s standing, and one of only two people in the world who could currently use teleportation, the Twin Kingdoms would certainly not leave him to his own devices.

According to Ines and Natalio, who had both been sent in advance, there was at least half a month’s worth of practically irrefusable invitations for meetings and banquets.

He was currently in an annex of the Purple Egg Palace, the same room that he had used last time. The furnishings had all been left in the same state as before.

The annex was currently on loan to Capua as an embassy, but the room he was using for this visit was not ordinarily used by anyone. However, it was constantly kept ready for use at a moment’s notice.

There was a mist generator ceaselessly active, so it was refreshingly cool. With the low humidity in the Twin Kingdoms, the mist generators were highly effective in cooling the area down. One of the differences between teleportation and normal travel was the lack of time spent. Another was the lack of fatigue from the journey itself.

That was even more the case for Zenjirou with his familiarity with using it. Because of that, there was only a mild sense of “oh well” when he found out that he had meetings from the first day he arrived.

It had been roughly an hour since he had arrived, and he was currently hosting two guests in his room in the borrowed annex of the Purple Egg Palace. One of them had vivid red hair, its length gathered together. She proudly wore the traditional dress of the nomadic tribes and seemed full of energy. The other had hair that was bluish-gray and fell to its full length in a straight curtain. She also wore traditional dress, although this woman seemed far calmer.

The former was Shuura, the eldest daughter of the Elehalieucco family. The latter was Nazeema, the third daughter of the Reierfon family. Zenjirou had met them both during his last visit, so he was at least somewhat acquainted with them.

“Thank you for accepting our request for a meeting, Your Majesty,” Shuura said briskly.

“We offer our apologies for the suddenness of the request, Your Majesty.” Nazeema’s statement was given with a far calmer tone of voice.



Zenjirou raised his right hand slightly as he answered. “Not at all. I am entirely willing to offer a rapid answer to such requests from the chiefs of the Elehalieucco and Reierfon families.”

Indeed, Shuura’s request had been submitted as that of a representative of the Elehalieucco family and Nazeema’s had been as the representative of the Reierfon family. Incidentally, his addressing the two leaders of the family as chiefs rather than dukes was due to it being a more sympathetic form of address for the two “nomadic dukes.” The royal family in the Twin Kingdoms would call them “dukes” and refer to the families as ducal houses. They would never use the phrases chief or tribe.

His consideration was somewhat evident from the form of address he used. The two girls’ smiles deepened as they simultaneously placed documents on the table between them and him.

“This is a letter of gratitude from my father, Chief Elehalieucco, to you, Your Majesty.”

“Likewise, from my father Chief Reierfon.”

Ines retrieved the documents from the table for Zenjirou and—after a cursory inspection—passed them to him.

“Pardon me,” Zenjirou said, opening them and casting his eyes over them. The letters were written in the language of the western region of the Southern Continent. Additionally, the sentences within them were simplified to the extent that a noble of a country could manage. It was likely a concession due to their knowledge that the only language he could—somewhat—read was this.

Grateful for the consideration, Zenjirou set about reading them. Common to both of the letters was deep gratitude relating to the new Dual Burn Parchment. Each of the four ducal families had been gifted one by Josep upon his ascension to the throne.

Unlike the originally disposable Dual Burn Parchment, the only consumable of the new version was the parchment made from the hide of the morph drakes. The magic tool itself could be used over and over again. It was therefore far more useful than the original.

That was particularly important for the two nomadic families, the Elehalieucco and Reierfon. The two tribes—as the name implied—maintained their lifestyle from the nomadic period of the country’s history. The majority of the tribes traveled the sandy dunes with their drakes, so getting in contact with the capital was rather difficult.

Of course, they had had the original Dual Burn Parchments for urgent matters before, but given their value, those were restricted to *true* emergencies. With the development of the new Dual Burn Parchments, the difficulties in contact were significantly eased.

Additionally, the indispensable component of the new tool—the morph drake hide—was almost only attainable in the Elehalieucco and Reierfon territories. What had theretofore been pests that ruined the grass the families’ drakes grazed on were now a source of income.

The Sharou, Gilbelle, Animeeum, and Elementaccato families were already sounding the other two families out for periodic purchases of the hide. Of course, the buyers were all leaning on the scales to get the price down as much as they could, but there were no laws against monopolies in this world. Therefore, the heads of both the Elehalieucco and Reierfon families had quickly opened negotiations to unify the prices they would charge for the morph drake hides. Thus, Zenjirou’s suggestion had benefited the nomadic families even more than expected.

The letter explained as much as simply as it could and offered their gratitude. Of course, duke or chief, their thanks would not just be in words alone. Each of the letters detailed “trifling” things also offered as thanks.

Chief Elehalieucco had offered a dash drake.

“Shuura, this letter says Chief Elehalieucco is gifting me a dash drake.”

“Indeed,” Shuura said, nodding and making her red hair swish.

The Elehalieucco family—along with the Reierfon family—was known for breeding the strongest dash drakes on the Southern Continent, so it wasn’t exactly strange that they would be offering a dash drake up as thanks. Offering the most valuable thing they could was not a wrong way to show their sincerity—even if Zenjirou wasn’t happy about it—but the problem was with its

pedigree.

“And it would appear that it has the same lineage as the chief’s personal mounts?”

Even among the tribe’s dash drakes, there were varying levels of quality. For the two nomadic families, the better dash drakes were exceedingly valuable—both in terms of practical utility and in showing influence. Therefore, a dash drake’s superiority was roughly tied to its owner’s status. Naturally, the very best were reserved for the duke (chief) and his immediate family, so they would not be given to others without thought.

The rarity of such a gift was perhaps best exemplified by a historical record in which the king closest to the nomadic tribes had been given a dash drake from the main family’s stock.

“Indeed, it is one of our best. It is ten years old, currently, and it should be ready for service at fifteen.”

Dash drakes lived to be around fifty. They were capable of carrying a fully equipped knight after about ten. Drakes that deteriorated quickly would be able to serve until they were about thirty, while those of better stock would be capable of working until they were forty. Of course, some were still racing across the battlefield in their fifties, and there were legends of dash drakes that had lived to eighty, but those were outliers rather than the norm.

A dash drake was in service for—at minimum—the twenty years between ten and thirty, while the hardiest lasted for the thirty years between ten and forty. It was fairly common for knights to have a single dash drake for the duration of their service.

Saying that the drake would be ready for action from fifteen was a way of showing their consideration. It was their way of saying that they were not only giving him the best drake they could, but that it would be just as good for a long time to come.

“I am grateful for Chief Elehalieucco’s thoughtfulness” was, therefore, the only way Zenjirou could respond.

“Of course, I shall relay your words,” the redhead answered proudly, not

seeming to catch his internal conflict.

A dash drake of such a caliber meant that Zenjirou would need to learn how to ride it on some level. In truth, it was rather bothersome.

Zenjirou continued on and addressed the other girl in the room. “Nazeema, Chief Reierfon is also gifting a dash drake, but one that is a year old, correct?”

On the Southern Continent, age was counted from one to begin with, so to Zenjirou, they would be zero years old—newly hatched drakes.

While dash drakes were huge creatures that were at least twice as strong as a warhorse, they were smaller than a human’s fist when they first hatched. Naturally, then, a newly hatched drake would only be around the size of a large duckling. Even at the most it could grow, it would only end up the size of a large dog in its first year of life. It would not be at all useful as a mount for a *long* time.

The young woman with the gray-blue hair gave a soft smile at his confusion. “We of the Reierfon tribe bring up the dash drakes personally, so we can ensure that they will show their full strength even if they change their master. However, the ideal is for its future rider to grow up alongside their drake. Spending such a long time together strengthens the bonds between drake and rider and enables them to have even greater strength.”

That was enough for Zenjirou to understand their aim. This dash drake was not a gift for him, but for his son, Carlos Zenkichi.

Carlos was officially three—or using the more familiar counting system to Zenjirou, he would be two. In twelve years, he would be considered an adult, while the gifted drake would be thirteen, the perfect age for the young prince to ride. If things went according to plan, then for over ten years, they would grow up together and the drake would be worth much more than a simple mount.

By thinking of Carlos, the Reierfon had perhaps targeted his weak spot slightly more effectively than the Elehalieucco.

“Understood. I am grateful for Chief Reierfon’s thoughtfulness. There is one thing I wish to confirm, though. By ‘one that is a year old,’ I assume that means I

may choose from several candidates. Is that the case?”

“It is.” She nodded with her smile. “There are several candidates among the hatchlings, so you can choose as you wish.”

“In which case, would it be possible to make that selection in two years—or potentially even later? I would like the candidates to all be brought to Capua.”

Zenjirou’s suggestion was rather bold and would cost a significant amount. However, it was by no means a meaningless suggestion. If he was the one making the selection, then he could simply choose now and there would be no need to bring them all to Capua. However, he was asking them to wait until Zenkichi was old enough to choose himself.

That was far from a bad deal for the Reierfon family either. While Zenjirou was nothing more than the prince consort, Carlos Zenkichi was the first prince. If things went as expected, he would be the next king of Capua, and *that* was who the drake was being given to. Rather than offering it to Zenjirou, who would give it to Carlos before he was even old enough to appreciate it, allowing the child to choose his favorite would give him a good impression of the Reierfon family.

The issue was that such a request went beyond what Nazeema could agree to as a representative.

“Understood. I shall ask the chief, to be certain, but I do not believe there will be an issue with that. I look forward to it, should it come to pass.”

“Does that mean that you would be accompanying them?” Zenjirou asked with slight surprise.

Nazeema straightened proudly. “Indeed. Even three years from now, the drakes will only be four. The path to Capua is not an easy one, so someone sufficiently versed in their care will be needed.”

Nazeema was—as the daughter of the duke—of a rather high position, but she was also a bit of an eccentric, willing to sleep in the drake stables to care for them, so she was particularly skilled at rearing them. While her appearance gave the impression of a rather restrained personality, she was confident in her skills.

“I see. You will be entirely welcome when the time comes, then.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

With that, the main goal of the meeting—both families offering their thanks and having them accepted—was accomplished. Following that, Zenjirou and the two women kept up a light conversation.

“There are really horses with wings on the Northern Continent?”

“They were tamed and used as mounts as well? That’s...”

“Knights who can fly would be a formidable force. Perhaps bows would be best against them? No, bows are more effective in aiming at a lower elevation than vice versa. Beating them...”

“With dash drakes, the major points you need to remain aware of are the legs and neck, but winged horses mean the wings themselves must be taken into consideration. Dash drakes can overeat without too much effect on their speed, but flying is another matter. Additionally, they may not even be able to carry someone without having eaten, so caring for them would be rather difficult.”

Shuura and Nazeema, having heard about the Husaria of Złota Wolność, had sparkling eyes as they spoke. Shuura was viewing them as enemies and wondering how the knights of the Elehalieucco territory might face them. Nazeema was considering what taking care of these new creatures that could fly through the air would mean.

“Only the commonwealth uses the winged horses on the Northern Continent, and I have heard that even within the commonwealth, their numbers are limited. While they have a rather large range, I doubt they could fly across the entirety of the ocean between the two continents. The trip takes close to a hundred days in a ship, so the horses likely would not deal well with being cooped up for that. I doubt that we will come across them on the Southern Continent,” Zenjirou responded.

“In which case, we can just spare them a modicum of wariness.”

“So, I would have to go to the Northern Continent if I wanted to see one.”

Their reactions to his explanations were just as dissimilar as the two women

were. While Shuura was treating them as theoretical foes and thinking up potential countermeasures, Nazeema was interested in the creatures themselves and wanted to care for them personally. However, both were equally interested despite how different their concerns were.

Time passed as they spoke until Shuura said, “Thank you once again for meeting with us today.”

“We appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule, Your Majesty.”

“Not at all. In fact, I am grateful to receive such valuable gifts from both Chiefs Elehalieucco and Reierfon. I would like to convey how much of an honor I find it once again.”

Shuura and Nazeema had risen and were just about to leave. As Nazeema took a few steps towards the door, she seemed to remember something and stopped before turning back to Zenjirou.

“Your Majesty, I believe Prince Largo has requested a meeting with you as well. I wish to inform you that my father, Chief Reierfon, has already given his agreement to what the prince wishes to discuss.”

“My father, Chief Elehalieucco, has done likewise,” Shuura added calmly.

Given how smoothly both of them spoke, everything up to the timing of their statements had likely been planned in advance. Additionally, the fact that they had waited until the very last minute made sure that Zenjirou understood this was the main thing they had wanted to tell him in this meeting.

“Very well, I shall be sure to remember that.”



The next day, just as Nazeema had implied, Zenjirou met with Prince Largo.

“Your Majesty, allow me to offer my thanks for visiting our country,” he greeted.

“Not at all, Prince Largo. This has been a fruitful visit for me as well.”

As Bruno left the throne and Josep ascended, Largo’s official position had changed as well, from prince to royal brother. In accordance with that, his influence within the country seemed to have changed as well. Those who had

been close to him as a “potential next king” despite his lower position in the line of succession had distanced themselves. Additionally, seeing his authority remain unchanged even after his opponent Josep had risen to the throne, he was seen as having a stable power base, so others grew closer.

From Zenjirou’s perspective, “prince” or “royal brother” were both royal positions to be addressed as either “prince” or “highness,” so it didn’t feel like much had changed.

When the prince sat down on the sofa opposite him, the first thing he brought up was perhaps the most natural topic—his nephew.

“I offer my apologies once more for Francesco causing a nuisance in Capua. If you have any complaints, bring them to me and I will deal with them as quickly as possible.”

“Perish the thought,” Zenjirou replied.

Largo spoke seriously despite the diplomatic disagreement from Zenjirou. “If he truly is not making a nuisance of himself, then I ask that you take care. That is an omen that he will soon be causing an even greater bother.”

“I will,” Zenjirou replied instinctively at the intense look in Largo’s eyes.

In fact, while Zenjirou was not aware of it, Francesco was just completing his enchantment magic tool, so Largo’s words were right on the mark. Regardless, they moved on to the main topic.

“I assume you have heard from Lady Shuura and Lady Nazeema?” Largo asked.

“I have not,” Zenjirou said, shaking his head. “All I have heard is that both dukes have indicated their support of what you wish to discuss.”

“I see...” He fell into silent contemplation for a moment before abruptly speaking again. “The truth is, we wish to purchase a great many jewels from Capua in the near future. I will be making the purchase, but the two dukedoms will actually be the ones using them.”

Zenjirou twitched at his statement. “The jewels” referred to the marbles that served as a medium for enchantments. Their existence was openly known

among both countries' royal families. So the statement essentially meant that Largo would be making many magic tools and providing them to the Elehalieucco and Reierfon families.

The clarity with which they were stating this meant that they were unlikely to use the marbles for anything particularly suspicious, but Zenjirou would still need to confirm that.

"The jewels? I do have the rights to some of them, but the final decision rests with Her Majesty Queen Aura. I would be willing to discuss the matter with that understanding if that is acceptable to you?" Zenjirou said, adding this restriction.

"We have taken that into account," Largo replied, nodding in understanding.

Indeed, Largo and the others knew all too well that it would be Aura they were ultimately negotiating with. However, they had seen that Zenjirou had the strongest rights to the marbles and took him for the most difficult obstacle. Between Queen Aura and Prince Consort Zenjirou, the former would clearly be the more difficult negotiating partner, but bringing negotiations to success would be far more difficult without Zenjirou.

Aura was very much used to negotiating and had a significant amount of skill in it, so in the worst case, they could take it as a loss in negotiation. Zenjirou, though, had desires that they did not understand, which could lead to a complete breakdown in negotiations with him. Additionally, that "worst case" was also eminently possible.

At the very least, this was exactly what had happened with Bruno and Josep after they had pushed against his emotional ties the wrong way. In contrast, Largo still had a good relationship with Zenjirou, but carelessness was out of the question.

As the man opposite him straightened, Zenjirou questioned him further. "Very well, then. How many of the jewels would be required? Additionally, what would they be needed for?"

"Of course. We would need at least twenty, preferably forty, and if at all possible, sixty. Each of them would be used for water creation," Largo said, honesty evident in his tone.

Water creation was the most in-demand magic tool for the primarily desert country of the Twin Kingdoms. The exception was the Animeeum family's territory, where water purification was in higher demand due to their salt lakes.

The Twin Kingdoms as a whole craved water creation magic tools, so the request itself wasn't odd. That made it all the stranger, though. Even now, the Sharou family was constantly creating water creation magic tools and they were sold out across the country. It was keeping the country running. So why did they suddenly need at least *twenty* more?

"Have circumstances changed?" Zenjirou asked.

Something might have caused the water creation tools they already had to be unusable. Perhaps the level of rainfall had decreased even further, leading to a higher demand. Those were the possibilities Zenjirou could think of.

Largo blinked at Zenjirou's thoughts going down a negative path before laughing and refuting it. "I thank you for your concern, but fortunately, nothing has happened. It is not due to an unforeseen development, but rather a matter of taking the opportunity to show significant action."

"Oh?" Zenjirou said, showing interest in both his expression and tone.

Largo made himself comfortable and started to explain. "Explaining fully will take quite some time, so I ask for your patience. Your Majesty, are you aware of the four dukes' respective rankings in our country?"

While Zenjirou didn't quite see how it was relevant, he answered truthfully. "More or less, yes. If I recall, the Elehalieucco family is the leader, with the Reierfon being second."

"So you are. Indeed. The Animeeum family is third, and the Elementaccato family is fourth. Not that it really means anything anymore," he said, finishing with a laugh.

The order of the ducal seats had little relevance outside of the location they'd be seated for at events and in what order they'd be greeted. Economically, the Elementaccato family was at the top, followed by the Animeeum family, then—much further behind—was the Reierfon family and the Elehalieucco family slightly behind them. It was the complete opposite order of their standing,

which made it clear just how little meaning that order meant.

Largo continued his explanation. “While that order currently has no meaning, it certainly did in the past. Before the split between the settled and nomadic families, when all four were nomadic, the order showed their strength and size.”

“I see.”

That was enough to convince Zenjirou even with his lack of knowledge of the specifics. It was easy to understand the order showing how things were in the distant past for them.

“The four nomadic tribes were recognized by the Sharou and Gilbelle families and became the four ducal families. After gaining the new power of the Sharou family’s magic tools, the Animeeum family’s salt lake and the gold mine the Elementaccato family discovered meant that they chose to settle and vastly increase their wealth. In other words, disregarding the salt lake and gold mine and assuming all four families were nomadic, the Elehalieucco and Reierfon families had more fertile ground, though that is comparing the nomadic territories within the desert.”

Largo then stopped speaking and reached for the teacup on the table, wetting his throat with it.

“Fertile? How so, specifically?”

Ostensibly answering his question, Largo continued. “Specifically, it was in the number of oases and the greenery that comes with them. Additionally, there is a difference in the length of the rainy season and its frequency.”

Desert oases and the plants around them were not entirely surprising. A desert that was literally nothing but sand and rock would not be inhabitable for humans or their livestock. A rainy season was also only natural. There were in fact rather few deserts where there was *no* rainfall on Earth.

The Elehalieucco and Reierfon families were relatively blessed in that way, which was exactly why they could maintain their current nomadic lifestyles.

“Still,” Largo continued, “wandering the desert is a difficult lifestyle. They live by alternating between several oases to rear their livestock. If they did not, they

would not have enough food or water for them.”

The nomadic tribes already had several water creation magic tools and several people that could cast the spell. However, that was only just enough to guarantee drinking water for people, and perhaps barely enough for some of their livestock.

There was not enough water for the livestock, bathing, or most importantly for growing the plants to feed their livestock. Therefore the nomadic tribes had no choice but to travel from oasis to oasis. Additionally, the water and plants at those oases were limited. The Elehalieucco and Reierfon had over ten thousand members each, and several times that in livestock.

Of course, they were split to match the scale of the oases, but if they carelessly stayed too long, they could accidentally destroy the vegetation beyond recovery. In fact, there were several oases where they had misjudged the timing for when to leave that still hadn't recovered.

“Well, I can hardly blame them for that,” Largo commented after explaining as much. “No one can really insist that they leave an oasis without having any idea where they would be heading next.” His expression tightened even more as he continued. “However, the loss of an oasis is more than just losing the water source. Depending on the situation, it could lead to the family being unable to go on.”

That was obvious once you thought about it. For example, if you had no supply of food and water, you could travel for only three days. In which case, if you came across the first oasis after three days and assumed you could reach another in another three days, draining the first oasis would also make the second unusable.

“Of course, no matter how many of those magic tools you have, they will not rejuvenate a depleted oasis. However, if you use the empty oasis as a reservoir and set up multiple water-creating magic tools around it constantly active, they will produce a reasonable level of water. If the area around the former oasis doesn't weather away, at least a reasonable number of plants will grow. Thus, even if the oasis cannot fulfill its original role, it would manage to work as a relay point.”

“I see,” Zenjirou replied, accepting the explanation.

If water alone was the issue, then the magic tools would be sufficient, but the plants were the only option for feeding the drakes. Therefore, turning the depleted oases into at least short-term resupply points would allow them to maintain their existing routes.

“That would make it a matter of life and death for the nomadic families. Are there so many oases that have dried out?” The ominous phrase “desertification” passed through Zenjirou’s mind.

Largo smiled and shook his head, though. “Not at all. Rather than the oases drying up, it is more that they are moving. An oasis in one place will dry up and another will well up, or else an oasis that dried up would recover. Such things are common occurrences in the long history of the desert. Looking at things overall, the total amount of water in the desert has not particularly changed.”

The changes in temperature, wind direction, and the general topography of the area would alter the amount of rainfall and the location of groundwater, which could then lead to former oases springing anew. Therefore taking the long view of matters, along with the overall state of things, it was not that serious. However, it was by no means a minor issue for the currently nomadic tribespeople.

“While it is not an overly concerning situation, it is still a significant problem. For the Reierfon family especially, oases that were hubs to several others have been drying in recent years, and we would like to ameliorate that.”

“I understand the situation. However, if there is a rainy season, could they not use that?” Zenjirou asked casually.

Given the rainy season, Zenjirou thought it would be more efficient to gather the rainwater rather than use magic tools to create water wholesale. It was a natural thought to have, but it was also something the royal family had tried throughout their long history of living in the desert.

“That is, of course, a consideration. Indeed, completely dried-out oases where it seems the groundwater will never return have been made into natural reservoirs by hardening the ground using earth magic. However, it *is* a desert, with high temperatures and low humidity year-round. While it may temporarily

retain water, that will soon evaporate.”

The man offered a slight shrug at that. The reason they created reservoirs out of the dried oases was that a small amount of water could be lifesaving every so often. That said, it was still a frayed lifeline at best. Or, more bluntly, it was no better than a comforting hope.

Once he heard that, Zenjirou made what was perhaps an understandable offhand comment. “Then would it not be better to gather water underground rather than in the open air? With a roof to cover it, the water should not evaporate so simply.”

Underground lakes were resistant to losing water, and the temperature was kept low. That was the extent of Zenjirou’s knowledge.

As was to be expected, Largo only offered a rueful laugh and rebuttal. “You are quite right. If we were able to do that, we would not have an issue. Firstly, modifying an existing but dried-up oasis is very different from excavating a new reservoir. It would need several mages capable of casting earth magic and several magic tools, so it is not practical. Additionally, the weathering of the sands is rapid, so even covering an oasis would lead to surprisingly quick destruction. Secondly, while perhaps I need not say as much, water underground cannot be used as is. Drawing the water up to the surface is rather difficult. It is possible to dig down instead and take the drakes to the underground water, but dash drakes are specialized for running on open plains. There is a risk of accidents even with trained drakes. Finally, the sun does not reach underground, so while this solution would provide water, it would not allow the plants the dash drakes rely on to grow.”

Although his words were a complete refutation of Zenjirou’s idea, his polite and logical explanation meant that the prince consort was not particularly offended. However, it made him realize that there had been a fundamental miscommunication with what he had said.

“I see. Each of those statements are understandable reasons. However, there is something I wonder: why would they excavate underground lakes in the plains? Desert plains or not, there should be some variation in the topography. They could bore a hole atop a decent-sized hill, or ideally a large rock, to allow

water to flow in and gather in a hardened cavern. I would assume that then boring sideways into that rock would allow the water to flow easily out.”

Zenjirou was remembering an old TV program about flowering plants growing in the shade of stones in the desert. Those stones were a natural phenomenon, but they had cave systems within them and stored water in both the rainy and dry seasons. The stored water would seep gradually out of the rock and allow plants to grow in the surrounding area even during the dry period. Zenjirou believed that with magic it should be possible to create the same circumstances. Making an artificial version would allow them to add a horizontal hole to get water out more easily when needed. Essentially, it would be like turning naturally occurring rocks into huge casks of water.

Even with magic, making something completely impermeable would be impossible, so the water would probably seep out of those as well and allow plants to grow around it.

Once Zenjirou had finished explaining—albeit clumsily—all of that, Largo just looked back at him with a dumbfounded expression.

“Prince Largo?”

Zenjirou was rather concerned he had said something odd, but the other man simply shook his head lightly as he regained his wits.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty. I simply could not hide my surprise at your advice. I never would have imagined that. Indeed, though, that would completely nullify two of the three concerns I mentioned. The cost of doing so with earth magic would remain, but that would perhaps be the *only* concern. Why has no one noticed such a simple solution before now?”

The latter half of his statement was him talking entirely to himself. Why had no one in the Twin Kingdoms realized something that Zenjirou was capable of pointing out?

The reason was extremely simple: with dash drakes being their main mode of transport, the nomads had seen the areas with excessive variability in terrain as obstacles to be avoided.

Even the dash drakes of the Twin Kingdoms, with their incredible speed over

flat ground and almost terrifying stamina, were not particularly suited to wide changes in gradient. Of course, that did not mean they were completely incapable of dealing with them, but it would make travel far slower and could result in broken legs if they lost their footing.

The greater problem was that there were wild drakes in the desert. Among them were, of course, carnivorous species. Several of those thrived in the much more varied topographies in the desert. While a trained dash drake was formidable enough to make you doubt it was truly herbivorous, they would still be at a great disadvantage in the hunting grounds of the carnivores. Inevitably, then, the nomads' routes had none of the cliffs and hills Zenjirou was talking about.

"Then it is worth consideration?" Zenjirou asked, somewhat taken aback by the prince's shock for what he considered making conversation.

Largo nodded firmly. "Indeed. It is most intriguing. Frankly, I am unsure it would work as well as we hope, but it sounds very much worth attempting."

"However, you mentioned that it only provided solutions for three of the problems you had. What of the issue that still remains?"

Largo offered a grin. "Three aside, a single problem can likely be forced through without truly solving it. Therefore, Your Majesty, I would like to alter my request. I would like to raise the minimum order from twenty to forty."

"I see..."

The man's aim was truthfully rather easy to understand. Essentially, at the same time as they made water creation tools, they would do the same for excavation tools. Forming huge reservoirs in the cliff faces and hills would require a commensurate amount of effort. However, that effort could be dampened by using magic tools for the work. With a marble, it would be possible to almost immediately make such a simple tool, hence buying more of the marbles—or "jewels," as they called them.

It was by no means an efficient method, but it would solve the base problem. The issue that remained was whether the results would be sufficient to justify the immense outlay buying the marbles would represent. Zenjirou was a foreigner, though, so there was no need for that to concern him. The concerns

that remained were whether they could prepare enough, and whether they could get a fair price.

“Are you certain? As you are aware, those jewels are by no means cheap,” Zenjirou asked, performing the rough calculations in his head.

The glass craftsmen had succeeded—to a certain degree—in mass-producing the marbles. However, the process destroyed the furnaces they used, and the probability of a specific marble being suitable for enchantment was extremely low. That led to an extremely low yield in addition to the prices being incapable of reduction.

It was hardly a surprise, to be frank. Even ignoring anything extraneous and taking the simplest numbers possible, if you assumed that ten craftsmen could only produce ten marbles in a month, each of those would need to sell for enough to feed one of them for a month. That was not even taking materials and fuel costs into account.

The time and man power required for production made costs skyrocket. They were rare, useful, and cost a lot to produce. There was no way they could sell them cheaply.

Even as Largo showed his understanding, he made a point of his own. “It is indeed as you say. Purchasing such a number will cost a somewhat absurd sum. However, while your country is the only supplier of those jewels for us, we are also likely your only client. I, therefore, believe there to be room for some negotiation.”

The statement was completely true. The marbles were one of the dearest desires for the Sharou family, and the Capuan royal family was the only one that could supply them. However, their value lay in their suitability as a medium for enchantment. In other words, they were of no real use to any but the enchanters of the Sharou family. It was an inescapable fact that the Sharou family would be their only clients. A single seller and a single buyer made for equals in some respects. If agreements fell through, then both would lose out.

“You are quite right. However, the jewels are still at an experimental stage, so preparing forty immediately will be quite the burden.”

While Zenjirou was disassembling the facts somewhat, it was also true to an

extent. In this case, telling the truth became a reason to put the prices up.

Largo seemed to expect his response and gave a somewhat exaggerated nod. “Understood. That is why I believe I have a sufficient offer in return. Your Majesty, do you know of exclusive contracts?”

“Exclusive contracts?” Zenjirou repeated, looking questioningly at the other man. Of course, he knew the phrase itself, but the way Largo said it clearly implied some deeper nuance. “I do not. What do they entail?”

Largo’s polite smile remained as he explained. “The phrase ‘exclusive contract’ in our country refers specifically to an exclusive contract entered into by a member of one of the ruling families. That is, either an enchanter of the Sharou family or a healer of the Gilbelle family. It refers to the exclusive right to that person’s skills.”

Zenjirou mulled the explanation over in his mind. “Would that be a contract akin to the one between Queen Aura and Princess Isabella?”

“No,” Largo refuted. “That was simply a normal contract with a somewhat longer time period. While I admit there was some amount of individual discretion involved, all the contract allowed was for Princess Isabella to use her healing magic on Queen Aura personally. In other words, the contract itself specified what magic could be used on which person. An exclusive contract is different. For the duration of its effect, there is no need for further negotiation or payment no matter what is asked of the contractor.”

Of course, there were limits due to the contractor’s mana capacity and the spells they knew, so it was not entirely unrestricted. However, within those limits, the contractor had to use their magic as the contract holder asked.

Zenjirou was unable to hide his shock upon hearing these terms. “Such contracts exist?” he asked. He couldn’t imagine how much money that would need. Nor did he think it seemed like a contract that should be bound up in money.

“It is no real surprise you are unaware. Until today, the only people who had ever been part of them were those of either family who were either highly ranked or highly known for their abilities.”

“Ah, I see,” Zenjirou said in understanding.

The exclusive contracts had been private arrangements between members of either family. For example, if the king had suddenly been taken ill or badly injured, it would be an issue if all the healers had already used up their reserves for the day. It was also a perfectly likely occurrence if there were no precautions taken. After all, there was practically always a line out of the Holy White Palace of both domestic and foreign nobility wanting the Gilbelle family’s aid.

There was only one price that would be as valuable as an exclusive healer for the Gilbelle family, an exclusive enchanter from the Sharou family for them. Thus, the exclusive contracts between the families had begun and so they had stayed until now. Only between the two families. But things were changing.

Zenjirou was not so foolish as to miss the implications of Largo bringing up the topic here.

“So you would suggest an exclusive contract to pay for the jewels?” Zenjirou asked to be certain.

“Indeed. What say you?” Largo asked with a genial smile. “Of course, however large the amount involved, it would have to be for a fixed-term contract, but I believe that to be a suitable payment.”

It was certainly an extremely tempting prospect. It was also something Zenjirou could not decide on his own authority. The final decision would need to be made by Aura. However, in order for that to happen, some specifics needed to be hashed out.

“It is a surprisingly attractive proposition, yes. Hypothetically, if we were to accept this, would Prince Francesco be the contractee? Or perhaps Princess Bona?”

“I am afraid that would be out of the question. While I cannot divulge the specifics, only those who have either exceeded or failed to exceed requirements of status, age, proficiency, and so on are eligible.”

Status went without saying. The king and crown prince would be those who had exclusive contracts as the contract holders rather than contractees. Neither

Princess Bona—who came from a lower-class family—nor Prince Francesco—who had no place in the line of succession—would violate that clause.

Age was also understandable after some thought. However skilled someone was, if they were either a young child or a senior with numbered days, they would not be permitted to enter into such a contract. Largo also explained that an older person could be granted an exception if they particularly wanted to be part of such a contract. Incidentally, it was this condition that precluded Bona, who was still in her late teens. Francesco was in his late twenties, though, and so would be eligible.

The final requirement was in proficiency. Just as with age, there were upper and lower bounds for that. If they were unaccomplished in their lineal magic, there would be little value in an exclusive contract with them. Conversely, neither family could allow the other use of someone *too* accomplished, so they were outside of consideration as well. In Francesco's case, he came in above the upper bound.

Putting things plainly, those who could fall under an exclusive contract were healers or enchanters whose status, age, and abilities would not cause concern. Once Largo had explained all of that, it made sense to Zenjirou.

"Understood. In that case, would it be possible to be told what magic they are able to use before the contract is made?"

"Of course. *All* of the magic the contractee can use will be listed."

There was a clear emphasis on the word "all" there.

In other words, the contractee would be assumed to not be able to use anything other than the spells they listed, even if they really had learned it. That was part of the conditions for the contract.

"Incidentally, the contract would be valid for two years in exchange for forty jewels."

"Two years..." Zenjirou mused.

That would ordinarily be so short as to be worth no consideration at all. Normally, it would take several months even for the simplest of enchantments, and *years* for more complicated examples. In practical terms, such a short

contract would be no different than purchasing one or two magic tools.

The marbles overturned that paradigm, though. A marble drastically reduced the amount of time necessary. With marbles, a tool that someone could create a few dozen or so of in a year could be increased to hundreds. It was truthfully a rather appetizing deal.

Of course, the mass production of marbles was yet to reach such a level.

Largo's smile didn't falter as Zenjirou thought things over. Instead, he made another point.

"However, as I am sure you are aware, those of the Sharou family have restrictions on their activities outside of the country in order to maintain agreements with the Gilbelle Papacy. Please be aware that even during the contract period, the contractee will remain in the country."

"Hm..."

Zenjirou had no real words in response to that.

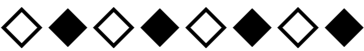
In the Twin Kingdoms, the Sharou family dealt with internal matters and the Gilbelle family dealt with external matters. Therefore, the Sharou family could not—as a rule—act outside of their borders. Francesco and Bona were exceptions among exceptions, and the Sharou family had needed much negotiation with the Gilbelle family in order to allow that.

Largo's statement was logical but at the same time extremely convenient for them. If the contractee could not leave the Twin Kingdoms, then for both ordering and receiving the magic tools, Capua would have to send someone here. Of course, one or two round trips were possible in a year, so there was that option, but it was obviously a request for Zenjirou to visit with his teleportation.

The merits of having someone capable of casting teleportation within their country periodically were obvious. While he was practically restricted to a single casting per day, it reduced a monthlong journey to mere moments. In fact, it was possible that Zenjirou's regular presence within the country was closer to the main goal of this discussion than the marbles. Zenjirou had a distinct feeling that was far from a groundless thought.

Whatever the case, the agreement involved too much for Zenjirou to agree to personally, so he was unfortunately unable to reply immediately.

“Very well, I shall discuss this with Her Majesty upon my return,” was all he could say here.



Several days had passed since then.

While Zenjirou was not in the royal palace, each day another guest from the Twin Kingdoms had arrived there.

Princess Margarita of the Sharou family was officially visiting, and her attendants and guards had been sent ahead of her. There was also an exclusive healer sent alongside her.

Additionally, slotted in between them was the former king Bruno.

“You are even bolder than I thought, Your Highness,” Aura greeted him.

“Hardly. You are already one of our closest allies and hosting two of our family. I have nothing to fear here. It has been a while, Queen Aura. How many years has it been since you stayed in our country?”

The young queen and old former king were in the farthest room in the palace. Only three people were in the room: the two royals and Aura’s confidant, Fabio. Both Capua and the Twin Kingdoms were keeping the fewest number of people involved possible. It was a truly private discussion.

“With secrecy being our top priority, please do not expect a great deal of hospitality here,” Aura chuckled as she reached for the tea that Fabio had prepared.

“Of course. I am only here for the day regardless, so there is no need.”

Bruno had decided that he would be leaving immediately via teleportation by Aura after their discussion had concluded. This speed was only possible now with people who could cast teleportation being present in both countries—Aura in Capua and Zenjirou in the Twin Kingdoms.

“Then let us use what time we have wisely and cut to the meat of our discussion, Your Highness. Or perhaps I should call you Remnant of the White

Empire?”

Despite the force behind her smile, the sly old fox just waved off the statement.

“You may use whichever you prefer. Well, I should warn you that perhaps the latter is best used outside of prying eyes and ears. Even if it is fact.”

The queen raised a red eyebrow at that. While she had already heard the information from Lucretia, there was a greater weight behind it coming from the prior king—the core of their country.

“Would you tell me the details?” she asked, her eyes fixed on him.

The older man’s genial mood didn’t falter. “I have no desire to hide anything, but I am honestly not as informed as you might like. After all, the only record was verbal, so there was much lost, and likely untrue portions.”

“There were no records? At all?”

“That was the contract, though the contract itself was passed down verbally as well.”

“And was the agreement itself only verbal?” the queen asked, despite knowing that there was no chance of that.

Just as she expected, the former king shook his head. “Hardly. It was a true contract bound by magic. Or so it is said.”

Contract magic was something Aura had very recently heard of.

“That was one of the lineal magics of the White Empire. However, Lucretia stated that had died out. Were there survivors?”

The remnant of the empire shook his head. “There were not. Still, survivors or not, magic tools exist, no? The majority of the magic tools we—or the Shulepov family at the time—made were collaborations with the other royal families. Naturally, there were those that sealed the contract magic of the third family within them.”

It was, now that it had been said, a natural explanation. Even now the Twin Kingdoms created healing magic tools by pooling the two families’ lineal magics. They would have obviously done the same when the White Empire existed.

“Indeed, Lucretia mentioned that the Lulled Sea was made using creation magic. I suppose it was therefore inevitable there would be magic tools from the other families as well. I assume they remain as a legacy in the Twin Kingdoms. Are there many others?”

“Who can say?”

Despite the former king obviously playing dumb, Aura didn’t pursue the question further. She had not thought to begin with that the Twin Kingdoms would reveal their trump card of the ancient magic tools from the White Empire.

“Well, no matter. There are other things I wish to ask, though. Who was this contract with? What were the terms? Does the tool itself still exist?”

The queen purposefully flattened her expression and Bruno also gathered himself and answered earnestly.

“The contract was with the Jötunn and ancient drakes of Utgardr. The terms were to abandon the knowledge from the era of the White Empire. Finally, as for the tool...I do not know. It does not rest with us. If the tales hold true, then Utgardr should still have it, but I have no proof.”

Utgardr. The name was familiar to Aura in two ways. The first was as it had just been used, as she had heard it from Lucretia. It was the name of the Jötunn’s city-state that had harbored the former remnants of the empire. The other way she had heard it was one of the countries of the northern reaches of the selfsame continent, Utgard. While it was not completely the same, it was so similar it was impossible to ignore.

“I believe you have already heard, but there is a country called Utgard on the Northern Continent. Do you know anything about it?”

Bruno offered a shrug at Aura’s sharp question. “While in position I believe it likely has a deep connection with Utgardr, I can assure you that it is not the same thing.”

The answer was both what Aura had expected and outside of her assumptions.

“I would like more detail,” she said simply.

“It is simple. If our teachings are correct, then it is impossible for anyone to travel to or from Utgardr now. Actually, no. There are a scant few for whom it is possible. Allow me to correct myself. None other than you or His Majesty Zenjirou could reach Utgardr; that is how far away it is.”

There was only one thing that could mean.

“Another realm...” she murmured.

“Assuming our teachings are correct.” He nodded. “Utgardr itself was originally another realm extremely close to our own, the territory of the Jötunn. While that was their stronghold, they had some connection with this world.”

As time passed, though, the distance between this world and Utgardr had grown and grown. Of course, the Jötunn had built a culture to rival the dragons, so they had resisted the separation for a while, connecting the two worlds. However, no matter how advanced a civilization they were, they could not overturn the laws of the world.

The Jötunn knew that and had decided to cut ties with this world.

“The issue there, though, was the many who were dependent on Utgardr. I do not know whether it was all of them, the majority, or only a small portion of them, but many of those people left Utgardr and decided to remain in this world. Our ancestors were among them.”

Those ancestors were the greatest issue among those who had decided to remain.

“The tenth family, the Demichevs—now the Gilbelles—aside, we—or at the time, the Shulepovs simply had the Jötunns’ protection. We were never officially pardoned by the dragons. They just gave tacit approval for our survival. Hundreds of years at least had passed, but that is nothing to the Jötunn or ancient dragons. We could therefore not simply say that it has nothing to do with us, just our distant ancestors. So we negotiated with the Jötunn and the dragons again, and with the contract, we bought our family. In a certain sense, the Gilbelles could be considered simple collateral damage.”

There were three major terms to the contract. First, that they abandon the knowledge and techniques of the White Empire—though they were permitted

to keep several magic tools as heirlooms. Second, that they remove themselves from the Northern Continent. Third, that the majority of the magic tools they were not permitted to take would remain with the Jötunn, while a small amount would be given to the dragons.

“That is what our teachings say, at least,” Bruno summed up. “I would not act high and mighty about it; after all, there are likely many things we are mistaken about. Try as we might, verbal tradition is just that, verbal.”

With the embargo on written records, they had managed to pass the gist down verbally. However, verbal records had a tendency to warp with time and result in omissions.

The topic had grown too much for her, so the redheaded queen took a deep breath to recover.

“I am rather unsure how to react. While it is extremely important information and will influence our policies going forward, there is too much to it, so I cannot come up with a simple response or method to deal with it.”

“I suppose so. Still, unlike me, you are a serving monarch. You cannot simply discard the responsibility.”

“Tch...”

Unable to refute him, Aura took a sip of her drink to break the conversation up, then continued once she had recovered.

“No matter. Let us deal with the most urgent issues first. I assume you have already heard reports from Lucretia, no? How much of a threat do you see the Northern Continent presenting?”

“Hmm...” the former king mused, resting his chin in his hand.

Aura narrowed her eyes and continued. “I will not renounce my husband or children. I am also assuming that their lineage will be revealed. Therefore, I see no avoiding Capua being involved in the dispute between the church and White Empire. We are, as the saying goes, in the same boat as the Twin Kingdoms. Dispense with the dissembling; negotiations can come after we have shared information and ensured our understandings of the situation align.”

It was Bruno's turn to raise an eyebrow now. Aura had been far more open than he had expected. After a period of silence, the older man surrendered.

"They will come. It will not be immediately, but they will come. I would estimate around a decade at the earliest. If things go well, it may be several decades, but the fact of their arrival remains."

The technological advances had led to ever bigger and better boats. The nations were growing stronger and stronger, focusing on expansion. All of it pointed towards an invasion.

"They *will*? There are already a great number of trading ships between the continent's coasts," Aura mentioned pointedly.

"Come now, do not play the fool. You were the one to say we should dispense with disassembling. I am not referring to the minor numbers of individuals making the journey. Ships either backed by the countries, or outright owned by them—that is the level of influence I am suggesting."

It wasn't a simple expansion of trade that Bruno was implying. Instead, he was foreseeing more forceful terms, or else outright violence.

Internally, Aura breathed a sigh of relief at Bruno being more willing to be open than she had expected. "Meeting the threat together will be most important. What countermeasures have you thought of?"

"Both domestic and foreign countermeasures. They are simple and straightforward, but that is our only option. We need to build up enough strength that we will not lose to the Northern Continent domestically, while also strengthening the Southern Continent—particularly the western reaches with ports—so that it does not fall."

That was what she had expected, an optimistic view. She decided to take things further.

"Look at this," she said, bringing out several sheets of paper.

There were several of the pictures the maid with Zenjirou had taken, carefully selected and printed. There were tools that Zenjirou had brought from Japan. While there was a risk in showing the results—even if not the tool itself—to a foreign royal, Aura saw those risks as worthwhile now.

“What in the world?!”

Just as she had expected, Bruno’s shock was enough to make him lose his cool for the first time that day. The shock was in regard to the pictures themselves and their printing.

“There will be no explanation of these. If you insist, then we can return to the explanation of your legacy from the White Empire. Regardless, look closely at these images. They are of the port city Pomorskie, of the Golden Commonwealth of Złota Wolność.”

“Hm...” For the time being, Bruno let the matter drop and looked over the papers. “How accurate can I assume these pictures to be?”

“You can take them as exactly what was visible in reality. There may be slight differences in color, but there is nothing missing that was there, and nothing shown that was not.”

“Hmm...”

The crease between the man’s eyebrows deepened. His long time on the throne meant he could understand immediately why Aura was showing him such classified information.

Laid out before him was a beautiful city with red roofs, white walls, and paved roads. Everything fit together, including the colors. There was also a number of people coming and going, along with their bright expressions. The variety in colors that they were wearing and the ability to take care of their appearances were evident. Additionally, the port itself was horrifyingly huge, with countless large ships.

The strength obvious behind all of that was extreme, even put mildly.

With a sharp expression, Aura spoke. “A country is often likened to a person. The king is their head, and the citizens are their limbs. However, I think that could not be further from the truth.”

It sounded like the queen was opening up with something completely unrelated, but Bruno understood her well enough to know that she would not do such a thing in this situation. Instead, he simply lifted his gaze from the paper to Aura’s face to bid her continue.

“After all, a person can understand mentally that if they hit their limbs on something, it will hurt. That pain then allows them to avoid moving their limbs in that direction. However, a country—particularly a large one—will not have its king feel pain from beating soldiers against a campaign. At the very least, until the battle is in front of the king’s eyes, it is someone else’s problem.”

Bruno could understand exactly what she was implying. A person would never sacrifice their limbs and keep trying to fight. However, there were plenty of kings who would just look to the next battle if their soldiers were rebuffed, assuming they had the strength and manpower to do so.

“Therefore, no matter what forces we bring to bear—no matter if we even rebuff their forces without a single casualty—that will not mean victory. As long as we do not have the ships that can cross to the Northern Continent, the status quo of them attacking and us defending will remain.”

It would be akin to a game of baseball with altered rules, having no bottom innings. However skilled your pitchers, and however *unskilled* the opponent’s batters, such a rule would see a draw at best, with there being no chance of victory. You could repeat the match over and over again, and eventually, you would lose.

Bruno had just as much experience as a head of state as Aura, so he immediately understood what she was saying.

“Then we need to have some method of striking at their strongholds... I understand the logic. Indeed, it becomes much easier to sue for peace if you have struck a blow against your opponent. So, what is it that Capua wants of the Twin Kingdoms?”

“‘Want’ is not quite the right term. We are simply telling you that our plan revolves around that. I assume you have heard my husband wed Princess Freya. Her homeland is one of the most developed countries on their continent in terms of their technology. We are moving to use those abilities to build ships of our own that can cross between the continents.”

Her claims were mostly true. Even if she failed to get the Twin Kingdoms on her side here, Capua did not have the option of ceasing their efforts towards intercontinental trade. However, it would also take a great deal of work. While

building the ships would take time, training sailors was even more difficult. The majority of Capua's naval capabilities were nothing more than local fishing expeditions. Even their small number of trading vessels only went up and down the coast. She could not begin to estimate how long it would take to train sailors capable of voyages on the order of a hundred days long—even *with* the help of the *Glasisir's Leaf's* crew.

The Twin Kingdoms could bridge the gap. Magic tools such as water purifiers, manipulators, and wind generators would make sea travel much easier. If they could make use of the healers from the Gilbelle family, the training could be less careful as well.

Bruno remained silent for a while before answering. "Give us a ship as well—at least one. We will pay in magic tools. The details can wait. I am not in a position to pledge the Gilbelle Papacy's support, but I will discuss it with them and aid in convincing them. However, all of that will rest upon the promise of a ship."

The queen outright grinned at his reply. "Then it is decided. I will pledge a ship on the level of the *Glasisir's Leaf*. How will you crew it?"

"I intended to discuss things with the Animeeum family. If the worst should come to pass, I shall appoint a captain in name and borrow personnel."

The Animeeum family had a massive salt lake. They were therefore the only group that had any level of use of ships in the landlocked country they inhabited. Even sailors who were only familiar with the still waters of a lake and small ships would be better to train than complete amateurs.

"I do not know where your thoughts are focused, but we do not have enough people that we can lend them. I would imagine Uppasala itself will be the best source."

"Hm, I suppose so," the former king said with a sour look.

While they might follow the same faith, he had no trust in them currently. That said, for both building and using the ships, forging connections with a more advanced country like Uppasala was indispensable.

"Very well, then," he said in resignation. "However, does that mean I can

assume that Uppasala is our ally?”

Aura offered a small shrug. “They are certainly enemies of the church thanks to the Lulled Sea. Additionally, with Princess Freya, I would assume we can treat them as such. I have at least gained permission to station a warship in Logfort—that is a lake in Uppasala—if the worst should come to pass.”

“If you have permission to lodge troops with them, what would you call them other than an ally?” Bruno asked sarcastically.

The queen responded with a fierce grin. “I would say that we have fulfilled the bare minimum in requirements to set off. If war truly breaks out, then we *need* a beachhead on the Northern Continent. Conversely, we need to avoid *forming* a beachhead on the Southern Continent at all costs.”

“Do you understand what you are implying?” the former king asked. “I seem to recall that Princess Freya’s current name is Freya Alcott Uppasala, no?”

It was hardly a surprise that Bruno’s voice grew sharp. Aura had given the Alcott duchy to Freya with promises of creating a port there. In essence, that meant that if she failed to keep Freya under control and Uppasala on her side, she would be literally paying in both money and labor to create a beachhead for the Northern Continent.

“I admit that there was a need to gamble. While the dangers should we fail are great, the rewards should we succeed are even greater, and our chances lie closer to success.”

It was a high-risk, high-reward strategy. However, the chances of success were far higher.

The former king let out a slight sigh as he admitted Aura’s words held true. “As your predecessor, I have to warn you. Assimilating foreign things is much harder than you think. While you, His Majesty, and Princess Freya remain in power, it will not be an issue. The problem will come with the next generation and the one after that. Once personal relationships fade, your descendants may see Princess Freya’s descendants as foreigners and they may find themselves at home in Uppasala, from the start of their bloodline rather than where they were born and raised. You will need to lay the groundwork in law during your reign.”

His words—those of a monarch who had reigned over a combined country of nomads from the White Empire and nomads from the desert who had yet to fall apart—had an indescribable weight to them.

“I thank you for your wisdom. I shall keep it in mind,” Aura replied, her face more chagrined than it had been at all that day.

Chapter 3 — An Artisan's Aspiration

"This is a shock. I'd honestly expected to be stuck with this for the rest of my life."

Indeed, the aged smith's expression was one of utter disbelief. The man had been given the name Völundr as proof that he was the best smith in Uppasala, and he was currently stretching and flexing his joints.

They didn't hurt. None of them did.

Standing in front of the smith as he was released from the decades of aches and pains in his back and hips were a man and a woman. The woman seemed to still be in her mid-to late-twenties, and the man had a tired air of someone middle-aged.

They were within a courtyard of the Capuan royal palace, commonly called the Craftsmen's Garden, as Margarita of the Sharou royal family met with the skilled smith. The middle-aged man at her side was a healer under exclusive contract to her.

He was technically part of the Gilbelle family, but low enough that you would get to his place in succession quicker if you counted in reverse. He was also known as the most overused healer in the Twin Kingdoms. Margarita actually spent more time with him than either her parents or husband.

"So, Sir Völundr, will you fulfill your promise and take me on as an apprentice?"

The man scratched his white hair awkwardly as the princess smiled at him in satisfaction.



It was not overly complicated to explain how this situation had come about. No sooner had Margarita arrived via Zenjirou's teleportation and dealt with the bare minimum of welcome parties and meetings with Aura, than she had gotten permission to meet with Völundr with the express purpose of becoming his apprentice.

It had been a completely obvious request for her, but things were not so simple for him. While Völundr may have been somewhat lacking in manners, he still knew how things worked. He already saw himself as part of Capua, and he was well aware that he could not be careless as he dealt with the royals of an allied nation.

However, there were still issues that prevented him from accepting on the spot. She was a princess. An already married one, at that. He wasn't sure he could teach her as he had all of his other apprentices, with harsh words and the odd jab. As far as her standing went, the answer was: obviously not. The cause of his lack of surety, though, was from looking at her.

She had visible muscle tone on her arms at even a cursory glance. Her hair was dried out from the heat of the forge, and her right eye was clouded from constant staring at the flames. She had the visible signs of a wholehearted smith. The like of which was rarely seen even in Uppasala.

While it would be rude not to treat her as royalty, it would also be rude not to treat her as a smith.

As a result of that hesitation, Völundr had—rather unusually for him—offered an excuse and left rather than an honest response. He had used the old injuries to his knees and back as a reason and said, "I am not in a state to take a personal apprentice. All I can manage at present are requests from Queen Aura."

In response, Margarita had suggested using her healer under exclusive contract to heal those injuries.

He had been taken aback. It was true that the situation had not proceeded as he had expected, but the majority of his feelings were of welcome. His knees and back had not been injured in some accident. Instead, they had gradually broken due to his long time smithing. They had faded even as his skill and

knowledge had grown.

He had increased his knowledge and polished his skills to supplement his ailing body. He didn't know how many times he had wished that he had both his younger body and his current knowledge and skills. Those fantasies had now become a reality.

"Truly? Just...nothing hurts. Am I completely healed?" Völundr asked, shivering slightly with joy and other emotions overwhelming him. The middle-aged man—the healer from the Gilbelle family—gave him a calm warning.

"Your old wounds are all healed. You will not be in pain and you will be able to move as you wish. However, there is nothing that can be done about your aging. I ask that you understand that."

His old, injured body had simply been made into an old *healthy* body. He had not been returned to his youth. Of course, one of the Gilbelle family's healers would never have been granted the full secrets of their magic, so it was hardly a surprise.

"Right, I understand. That is quite enough in itself. Now I just need to listen to my body as I work my way up."

"Sir Völundr," Margarita put in, seizing her moment. "He is a healer under exclusive contract to me. If you agree to take me as your apprentice, then it would be possible to repeat what we have just done periodically."

"Hmm. But I must have Queen Aura's permission along with your own king's..."

"Of course, I have acquired permission, although it is only for the rest of this year at present," Margarita answered. She had prepared as fully as she could.

King Josep of the Twin Kingdoms was well aware of Margarita's interests. Knowing her zeal for her craft, he had given up on convincing her. Conversely, he also knew how discerning she was, so he was able to trust it wouldn't end in disaster.

Regardless, if she had permission from both monarchs, he would find it difficult to keep refusing her.

“Very well, I’ll take you on.”

“Thank you, Sir Völundr!” she exclaimed, stepping towards him.

“However!” he said sharply. “As my apprentice, I will treat you as such in the workshop. You will need to entirely forget your position as royalty. If you cannot accept this, then it will not happen.”

In the workshop, Völundr’s apprentices would deal with not only his harsh words, but potentially strikes as well. Additionally, with the apprenticeship currently only set for around half a year, his teaching style would inevitably grow much harsher. There would be no chance of her graduating from his instruction, even after a limited time.

“Ah, of course. That is exactly what I want.”

Her smile was almost frenzied as she answered.



Meanwhile, Aura and her husband’s concubine were meeting in the inner palace.

The chamber was a reception room in the main building, but rarely used. It had none of the electrical appliances that Zenjirou had brought from Earth.

For the time being, the appliances from Earth were being kept away from Freya as much as possible. Of course, Freya’s maids had permission to borrow the game console, so it was more about not making a show of things than keeping it top secret. Freya and her maids were also free to enter the area of the gardens where the hydroelectric generator that fed them all was situated, so it was practically impossible to keep the technology hidden entirely.

Still, it was a secret at the present moment. Officially ending that secrecy was not Aura’s job, but her husband’s.

The two of them snacked on food and sipped tea while speaking of relatively inconsequential matters. In that respect, both royals by birth were entirely comfortable.

Eventually, it was Aura who brought things to the matter at hand.

“Now, Princess Freya, I assume you have some reason for purposefully

requesting a meeting with me while my husband is abroad?”

Indeed, it was at Freya’s request that this meeting was even happening. Therefore, it made perfect sense that the topic for discussion would come from her.

Freya seemed to have been waiting for that question, as her smile fell away to reveal a serious look. “Indeed. In truth, I had something that I wished to ask you without it making its way to Sir Zenjirou.”

“Hm?”

Freya hesitated for a moment after Aura’s noise of acknowledgment before letting the words fall from her lips.

“Well...does Sir Zenjirou properly relax when he is with you, Your Majesty?”

The question was far from what the queen had expected. Her reddish-brown eyes gave a single blink.

“Well, of course he does, though that is admittedly based on my own perspective. But I am confident I am not incorrect. If you feel the need to ask that, can I assume he does not with you?” she returned.

Freya nodded, silver hair swaying. “Unfortunately not.”

Aura’s face also turned serious at the answer.

“In the sense that your new marriage is not going well?”

Aura was rather confident that she had “allowed” much since Freya had become Zenjirou’s concubine, so it was a concern she could not overlook. However, Freya shook her head at that question as well.

“Fortunately, things are going well on that front. Honestly, so much so that I could not ask for more. However, it is mainly due to Sir Zenjirou’s consideration for me.”

Freya was remembering what Aura had said to her on the first day she had moved into the inner palace as Zenjirou’s concubine—that this was a place for him to be able to relax his mind. Fortunately, her insistence to the maids she had brought from Uppasala that they not clash with the locals had borne fruit and they had assimilated well. However, it was still not somewhere he could

relax. If anything, Zenjirou was doing his utmost to make things better for Freya in any possible way he could.

Aura's expression relaxed at Freya's regretful explanation of the situation. Things were even better than she had hoped.

"But of course. That is his nature. He will show that consideration until you are fully part of the inner palace and able to be as at ease as you were in your family home."

"But does that not contravene my promise? Sir Zenjirou putting this effort in for me seems to be missing the point, somewhat."

With both her stubbornness and integrity being what they were, Freya wanted to keep her promise and provide Zenjirou somewhere he could relax. Aura gave a satisfied nod at her attitude.

"There is no avoiding it," she replied. "I will say it again, that is his nature. Harsh as it sounds to say, providing a place where he can relax will require first making it a place where *you* can relax. As I initially said, he dislikes people arguing around him. Your avoidance of that is more than enough for now. Frankly, I had not expected you to keep your maids so well in check." The queen offered a slightly challenging smile.

"They were carefully selected and I will do all that I can to ensure Sir Zenjirou does not begin to dislike me."

Freya straightened pointedly, throwing her shoulders back. She was declaring that she would not do or say anything to ruin Zenjirou's feelings towards her, and that she would use the "right to compete for his affection" with Aura that she had allowed.

"That is a good answer. Honestly, I am impressed. I had been prepared to warn you on an occasion or two."

That was entirely true. Unfortunately, it was far from likely for there to be no issues when another concubine joined the inner palace. When such issues happened, it was far more common for them to be precipitated by the maids the concubine brought rather than the concubine herself.

There were many reasons for this. Excessive loyalty to their mistress, trying to

gain an advantage for either themselves or their mistress, or perhaps even just combativeness rather than any real reason.

In this case, the maids that Freya had brought with her were from the Northern Continent and that continent had a strong tendency to look down on those of the Southern Continent. Aura had expected that to show in their actions and cause dissent in the inner palace.

At present, though, there had been no problems whatsoever, so her expectations had been exceeded in a good way.

“While it may sound odd coming from me,” Freya continued, “I do not think you can let your guard down yet. I believe I have only brought people with enough loyalty, ability, and good enough character, and at present, they are meshing well with the maids here. However, only they know whether that is from their own desires or due to my orders. If the latter is the case, then I cannot refute the possibility of them losing their restraint later.”

Aura nodded in agreement with the princess’s harsh but realistic view. “I am glad to hear it. Continue as you are. It seems to be bothering you significantly, so I will inform you that his disposition towards you is clearly better than before you were wed. I can at the very least state that you have made no missteps at present.”

“Thank you,” Freya said with a smile. However, her actual feelings were much more conflicted. She could understand that the advice and consolation coming from Aura was due to the queen’s confidence in her superiority in terms of the affection she received from Zenjirou. At the same time, Freya was aware of how abnormal she herself was.

Originally, her suggestion had been for a marriage that benefited her country while also preserving her freedom. She had appreciated his behavior and the way he didn’t look down on her, but she would hesitate to say that she felt love for him. The proposal had been based far more on self-interest than affection.

Now, though, she was competing with Aura for his affection. The human heart was a strange thing. Of course, part of it could simply be her own competitiveness rather than true affection for him.

“Regardless, the inner palace has calmed down again since your arrival. From

here on, your actions outside of the inner palace will be unrestricted. Of course, you will need to inform me of issues and plans ahead of time.”

Freya gave the queen a happy look at the statement. Between her arrival and today, Freya had needed to remain in the inner palace outside of official functions. It was normal for such a lifestyle to continue for the rest of a concubine’s life, but Freya would not settle for that.

Well, she *had* been prepared for it in the past, but growing to know Zenjirou and succeeding in marrying him had thrown that unfortunate future aside. The blessings of a life of adventure and search for the unknown, grasped with her own hands, made Freya shiver once more.

However, she then remembered a formidable enemy standing in the way of her immediately racing from the inner palace. The formidable enemy in question: the heat of the blazing season. She had yet to adapt to the temperature on the Southern Continent. In fact, the mist-generating magic tools in the annex meant that the temperature felt subjectively lower. If she could hang in there for another month, the active season would begin. Still, not even Freya would immediately want to start acting.

With those thoughts passing through her mind, Freya remembered something else that had to be brought up immediately.

“Ah, Your Majesty? There is something I wish to confirm with regard to my actions ahead of time. What are your thoughts on Lady Lucretia from the Twin Kingdoms and her wishes?”

Many even in Capua knew of Lucretia’s desire to become Zenjirou’s concubine. If that decision was to be made, then Freya would need to be willing to support her. Conversely, if Aura was to show displeasure with it, she would need to match those feelings.

“Hm...”

Aura fell into thought for a while at Freya’s honest question. Freya had already married Zenjirou, and Aura rather respected her abilities and personality. Still, the motivation and skill she had meant that dismissing her was unwise. Either way, with that in mind, it made more sense to bring her into the fold rather than keep the household business from her.

Aura's face twisted as she began to speak. "To be frank, it is almost certain that my husband will take a concubine from the Twin Kingdoms. Additionally, it will need to be sooner than we assumed."

It went without saying that the reason for that was the clear threat the Northern Continent represented. Capua and the Twin Kingdoms needed a full alliance as soon as possible to stand against the threat that was likely to come. It was a rarity on the Southern Continent for royalty to equate to lineal magic, but Zenjirou's concubines would be part of political marriages.

The queen kept her emotions in check, purposefully speaking calmly. "Lucretia is indeed the first candidate. There *is* also another: Princess Bona. Considering his feelings, though, the scales must tilt towards Lucretia."

"Wait? They must?" Freya asked, taken aback at that statement.

That was far from what she had expected. As far as Freya had seen, Zenjirou was rather relaxed with Bona and honestly seemed to struggle somewhat with Lucretia.

Then again, they had spent nearly a hundred days together on the *Glasis's Leaf* and seemed to be much closer now. Still, even with that, the most optimistic way of looking at it put them on just about equal footing.

Aura seemed to understand her assumptions and nodded. "In terms of simple compatibility, Princess Bona would beat Lucretia. However, there is a more fundamental issue. Princess Bona has no inclination to be his concubine. Or more accurately, she has not even considered it. Conversely, Lucretia is ready and willing."

The explanation made Freya look more and more doubtfully at Aura as she went on. "Is that not prioritizing *their* emotions over Sir Zenjirou's?"

Freya was sure that Aura would not suggest such a thing, but that was the only way she could take it. Aura shook her head as if to disagree and continued.

"No, the important thing is his peace of mind. He would feel guilty for pushing someone into a marriage they did not wish for."

One way of taking that was as an unfortunate effect of his passivity. Aura herself felt it to be a delicate situation. She would certainly take Bona—who,

while having no great stores of mana, could use enchanting—over Lucretia, who could not use the lineal magic at all. Particularly with the accelerating international instability, enchanters *now* would be a better bet than several being born into the next generation.

However, she was prioritizing Zenjirou’s feelings over that. Freya could immediately see how that was the case once it was explained.

“I see. That certainly makes sense now that you mention it.”

Freya had only been Zenjirou’s concubine for a few months, but she had associated with him in one way or another for over a year. Because of that, she had a fair idea of the kind of person he was. Understanding that, she continued.

“However, in that respect, I do not think someone he does not wish to marry should be brought in as a concubine. After all, he does not want concubines to begin with.”

Aura could not resist a hearty chuckle at Freya completely ignoring her own position there.

“And are you in any position to say that?” she asked through chuckles. “You are not incorrect, though.”

After all, Freya had forced herself into a position to become his concubine. Still, she showed no shame as she went on.

“I am actually telling myself as well. While it might sound arrogant, I am confident that I have gained at least some favor from Sir Zenjirou. While I am still new to my position and unable to offer him a place to relax, I can see that he has some fondness for me and know what kind of behavior he likes.”

“And you think Lucretia lacks that understanding?”

The silver-haired princess nodded at the redheaded queen’s question. “I do. I can vouch for her enthusiasm and that she is truly trying to help Sir Zenjirou in her own way, but as things stand, she would be more of a burden for him.”

“Hm, you would go so far?” Aura murmured, mostly speaking to herself.

Freya, too, had shared the journey on the *Glasis’s Leaf* with Lucretia. She would be more familiar with the kind of person Lucretia was than Aura would.

Therefore, Aura did not discount her words and instead asked for specifics.

“What is the issue? What about her is such a concern to you?”

“That she knows too little about Sir Zenjirou. She has barely any understanding of his characteristics, and particularly his values.”

“I offered her some advice before the voyage, but I suppose it had no effect.”

The advice in question was that she should focus on having as few detriments as possible rather than as many benefits as possible. Zenjirou was generally kind and rational, so while most didn’t realize it, gaining his disapproval was far easier than losing it.

Freya considered the comment for a moment. “No...I think it did. You mean before the *Glasis’s Leaf* left for the Northern Continent, correct? There was a distinct difference in her assertiveness before and after that.”

Until then, Lucretia had been practically spinning her wheels, but afterwards, she had calmed down and just occasionally tried to draw out a positive reaction from him. The “cowardly” way she began to interact with him opened up some distance between them, but likely made things much better from Zenjirou’s perspective.

Even so, Freya didn’t think she understood Zenjirou well enough. She had a slightly mocking smile as she continued.

“Lucretia is the same as me. Well, more accurately, how I *was*. She definitely wants to marry Sir Zenjirou but does not see his affection as necessary. She has other goals, and if those goals are met, she will compromise massively. In that respect, she certainly is more ‘convenient’ than Princess Bona, I suppose.”

“If we are including the past, then I would fall into that category too. Frankly, it is somewhat painful to hear,” Aura offered with a rueful smile.

Aura, Freya, and Lucretia. The commonality between the three of them was that they had all wished dearly to marry Zenjirou, but Zenjirou himself had not been the reason. Aura had wanted a figurehead spouse who would not undermine her power base. Freya had wanted a husband who would allow her freedom after they married. Lucretia wanted to be part of the Sharou family again. Marrying Zenjirou would see her transferred from her adoptive Broglie

family to her birth family. She would be able to officially call Philibert and Yolanda “father” and “mother” in official situations. Therefore, she would be willing to negotiate a lot on what the marriage would look like. The marriage itself would fulfill her goals.

“The same was true of you?” Freya asked, blinking in surprise.

The rueful smile on the queen’s face deepened. “It was indeed. I used magic to summon my husband. It was impossible to hold affection for a man I had yet to meet even once. To begin with, I was calculating as queen. Of course, I interacted in good faith, though.”

Freya could sympathize with what she was saying. They had met, marriage had been proposed out of self-interest, and then things had changed and grown into friendship and affection. The path they had taken was the same for both queen and princess.

Suddenly, Freya had a realization. “I see, so there is a possibility Lucretia will do the same. Although, I think that would make things more difficult rather than less.”

“Hm? Ah, considering her disposition, I cannot say your concerns are unfounded.”

Aura heard what went unsaid and her expression soured. There was a significant possibility that love could blossom from the marriage proposal made out of self-interest in the way it had for Aura and Freya. That was not because Zenjirou was a particularly charming man. It was simply part of being bound in a contract of matrimony or betrothal and interacting in good faith. Of course, compatibility was still a consideration, so it was not absolute.

“Indeed. If Lucretia sees Sir Zenjirou as not just ‘a tool for her ends’ but ‘a target of love,’ will she cause discord in the inner palace? I cannot dispel those doubts,” Freya explained.

“There is no room for doubt,” Aura declared firmly. “If she remains the way she is, there will certainly be discord.”

A laugh slipped from Freya’s lips at that. Once the two of them had finished laughing together, the queen spoke seriously.

“You do not seem aware of it, but people like you are rare. Usually, when several people are in love with a single member of the opposite sex simultaneously, the relationship becomes more muddled. There are many more people who believe the satisfaction of their feelings is a legitimate demand.”

They assumed that because they loved a person, that person should love them back. Considering it properly revealed those points to be completely unrelated, but there were a surprising number of people who felt that otherwise.

“It sounds like feeling that way would be too much effort.”

“You and I are the ones who need to put the effort in here. We cannot allow it to fall on my husband.”

Strictly speaking, it was Queen Aura who wanted Zenjirou to have concubines, not Zenjirou himself. Freya joining as a concubine had been due to her own desires and Zenjirou had accepted them. That would be even more the case for Lucretia.

Therefore, it was they who needed to put in the effort to solve such problems, not Zenjirou.

“I quite agree,” Freya responded firmly.



Several days later, Zenjirou was once again safely back in Capua.

While he had a fair amount of duties now as both a member of the royal family and as Duke Bilbo, he naturally wasn’t working on the day of the journey itself. Therefore, he moved directly back to the main building of the inner palace.

It was still the blazing season and the literally life-threatening heat meant that there was a long lunch break scheduled. That meant that Aura was there in the living room to greet him.

“I’m home, Aura,” he said to her.

“Welcome back.”

They embraced in the middle of the room before sharing a kiss. While feeling

the heat of her skin on his was pleasant after such a long time away, the weather being what it was meant that it soon began to feel stifling. The same probably held true for her as well.

“While we have plenty to speak of, perhaps we could relocate?” she suggested, gesturing towards the bedroom.

“Seconded,” he replied, moving along with her, hand in hand. “Ahhh,” Zenjirou sighed in pleasure once they’d stepped inside. “I’m alive.”

“Indeed, it still feels like a completely different world in here,” Aura agreed.

The cold air coming from the AC was a welcome respite from the heat of the season. Since this was the only room where it was installed, it may as well have been another world.

The two of them sat in wicker chairs that had been brought into the room, facing each other.

“The mist generators are fairly effective, but not to this extent,” Aura remarked. “I considered that we may have to offer Freya refuge here depending on how things develop, but I am glad that has not yet come to pass.”

Zenjirou shifted slightly at her words. “Yeah, you might not have to worry about that anymore.”

They had—at least to a certain extent—kept the things Zenjirou had brought from Earth away from Freya and the other Uppasalans.

“Well, it is rather too late, really. We know more or less what kind of person Freya is, and we need to build a relationship between our two countries. We should accept this level of risk, I believe.”

Zenjirou had already used the flashlight and camera in front of Freya without any real concern. The maids were also able to borrow the game console and the area the generator was set up was not really restricted. Indeed, as Aura said, it was a bit late to worry about it.

“Got it. I guess we should invite her to the main building at some point, then.”

“Leave that to me,” Aura replied. “You *inviting* her would cause issues. Of course, your permission is a major assumption with it.”

Zenjirou—now having two wives—understood what his first wife meant by that.

“Ah, yeah. I’ll count on you for that, then.”

If Zenjirou invited Freya to the main building it could be taken as Zenjirou only seeing the main building as his home rather than the inner palace as a home and that he was treating Freya as a guest.

“Well, we can leave things with Freya until later and just discuss what has happened.”

“True, although she is part of what has been happening here.”

Thus, the husband and wife launched into the now-familiar dance of updating each other on what each had been involved with.

“I see,” Aura said once Zenjirou had finished. “The Elehalieucco and Reierfon families are gifting you dash drakes to show their thanks. We will certainly be unable to refuse them.” She let out a breath.

“So we’ve gotta accept, then,” Zenjirou said, having expected as much.

“Indeed, dash drakes of stock restricted to the Elehalieucco and Reierfon families are their greatest treasure. Offering them as a gift is the greatest sign of thanks they could give. Refusing it—assuming we were not prepared to cut ties entirely—would be unwise.”

“Yeah, that figures. On top of that, if I didn’t ride it and just loaned it to someone like the bow, that’d be bad too, right?”

“It would. It would be different if you were considered elderly, but as you are not, avoiding that would be for the best.”

“Yeah, I thought so...”

Zenjirou slumped as she told him what he already knew. In other words, he’d now have to take the riding lessons he’d thus far avoided. Aura gave a half-smile at his reaction as she spoke.

“It is a rather unwelcome favor for you, I suppose. Normally, though, it would be worth cheering for joy. Frankly, I am somewhat envious. As far as I know, there has not been a single Capuan who has ever been gifted one.”

“Well, I *am* grateful for it.” Zenjirou shrugged. He was interested in riding a dash drake.

“As they will be traveling by land, it will be at least the active season before they arrive. There are several months until then, so perhaps it would be best to learn beforehand.”

Zenjirou understood there was no avoiding that, so he took things optimistically. “Got it. There’s no harm in learning, at least. Who am I learning with, though, and where?”

Zenjirou was royalty, after all. They could not just pick some knight who rode well to teach him. His instructor would need both the necessary skill and prestige to teach the prince consort. It also had to be someone who would not use the position for their own benefit.

“Well, I shall teach you the basics. We can get a particularly placid drake that the royal family owns and have it brought to the inner palace gardens. You can learn with that.”

Zenjirou was taken aback by her statement. “We can do that?”

“The gardens are large enough. I suppose we will have to take out several flowerbeds and only be able to have it walk or maybe run a little. Still, that will be enough to learn the fundamentals. Additionally, I can at least teach those fundamentals.”

He’d be taught in the inner palace by his wife. He could honestly look forward to that. If there was an issue, it would be that carrying out something of that scale in the inner palace would mean he would need to discuss it with his other wife first.

“What about Freya, then? She’ll definitely notice dash drakes in the garden, and I doubt she’d just keep quiet when she does.”

“True. Perhaps we should consider Freya and Lady Skaji joining in as well, then?”

Her comment was very convincing. Considering how Freya was, there was practically no chance she would pass up the opportunity to ride a dash drake. The same was even truer for Skaji. She was a skilled warrior and would not miss

the chance to learn how to ride the most reliable form of transportation in this world.

“Yeah, I think that works.”

Without any real intent to do so, Zenjirou, his wife, and his concubine would likely be sharing an activity in the inner palace before too long.

“And the other one is to be for Carlos? That will be a good partner for him.”

For male royals, riding dash drakes was practically an indispensable skill. Apart from people like the prior king, Carlos II—who had been particularly frail—and Zenjirou—who had been brought up in another culture entirely—it was one of the first things they would learn. On the Southern Continent, a male royal who could not ride a dash drake was like an adult in Japan not having a standard car license.

Dash drakes lived much longer than horses and were considered juveniles for a long period. That meant that while there was a bottleneck waiting for them to grow old enough, they could also grow alongside their riders and be partners in the true sense of the world. Their longevity meant that it was rather common for a knight to use a single dash drake for the entirety of their service. With Carlos’s drake coming from the Reierfon’s drakes, not only would its abilities be higher than average, but so would the prestige of riding it.

“Would we bring up the drakeling in the inner palace to begin with?” Zenjirou asked.

“No,” Aura replied, shaking her head. “It will be brought up in the drake stables. Caring for a dash drake is a specialized job and unfortunately, one dominated by men. There are none who would be able to enter the inner palace, so that is the only choice.”

Naturally, the drake Zenjirou learned with would effectively commute to and from the inner palace each day.

“Are you going to be the one bringing them? There are others in the inner palace who can handle them, right?”

“I will have Ines and Margarette do so. They both can. I am unsure, but Louisa likely can as well.”

“Huh, I didn’t expect so many women to be able to ride them,” Zenjirou said, impressed.

“Well, the practice drake will be particularly docile to begin with. If you were to just lead it with the reins on foot rather than ride it, I would wager that you would be able to do so after the first day.”

“Nice, guess they’re clever.”

Zenjirou was looking forward to it more and more as Aura continued. Regardless, they were done discussing the drakes for now, so they moved on to the next topic.

“Prince Largo’s request is much more of a problem. Whether we can immediately provide forty of the jewels, it is not impossible with a little leeway. Our manufacturing has progressed to that point.”

The craftsmen were more familiar with things and so were producing them more quickly. They still hadn’t solved the issue of burning out the furnaces as they made them, so they would plateau before long, although Völundr was likely to be able to help there.

Aura’s comments made Zenjirou suddenly pick up the thread of the conversation.

“Talking about glass production, there’s that letter from Priest Yan I showed you.”

“The introduction to the Glassworkers of Bohevia? I would like to get that moving as much as we can, but it involves the Northern Continent. We should shelve it for the time being.”

“Got it.”

Either way, even as things stood now, Largo’s request was something they could accept.

“We would be paid by an enchanter under an exclusive contract for two years. That is...certainly tempting. Very much so, but the location is another matter.”

She let out a concerned sigh. With the production of marbles, even two years

would be enough for a significant number of magic tools. The issue was that even while under the exclusive contract, they had been told the enchanter would remain in the Twin Kingdoms. The requests, along with the exchange of marbles and magic tools, would have to be done by Zenjirou using teleportation.

“Well, that’s what they’re after. They want me somewhere I’m convenient for travel.”

Aura nodded.

“Likely so, yes. They are well aware of the utility of having someone who can cast the spell within their borders. That reminds me, Talajeh certainly didn’t let the opportunity slip by.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure whether to call her stubborn, but she definitely doesn’t shy away from effort to earn her money.”

Indeed, Talajeh had used teleportation from both Aura and Zenjirou while the latter was in the Twin Kingdoms to carry out a round trip herself. She had, it seemed, run out of stock to sell. She’d therefore grabbed the opportunity with both hands, a true businesswoman.

“She even said she wants me to send her to the Northern Continent if she can get permission from the leaders in the Twin Kingdoms.”

“You cannot doubt her spirit, at least. Though there is no way they will allow that,” Aura said with a chuckle.

The Elementaccato metalwork would have likely sold gangbusters even in the Northern Continent, and there were products there that would sell on the Southern Continent as well, but such adventure was more than a daughter of the ducal families would be permitted to undertake.

“Well, forget about that. What do you think about this exclusive contract?”

“Hmm...” Aura murmured, falling into thought. There were advantages and disadvantages alike to accepting it. They had more or less succeeded in the mass production of marbles, so that wasn’t an issue. They could get the required number with a little patience. The temptation of the contract itself went without saying. There were many magic tools Aura would want made—

both as precautions against the Northern Continent and in a more general sense.

There was just one problem. It would require Zenjirou to regularly stay within the Twin Kingdoms. That was a large negative to the agreement. Zenjirou himself didn't really realize it, but he was currently fulfilling a large number of duties. He stood in for Aura, had his own duties as Duke Bilbo, and also had to periodically visit the Northern Continent as Freya's husband. None of them were particularly difficult or laborious, but there were annoyances involved with each of them that required his status, so there was no one who could substitute for him.

At a push, Natalio might be able to fill in for a small portion of his role as the duke with his own position as the leader of Zenjirou's knights. Zenjirou had found himself somewhat sympathetic to the knight, whose rights and duties had both grown far beyond what he had first expected, much to his distress.

Despite all that, though, the exclusive contract was tempting. Once she had thought it all over, the queen gave her response.

"I wish to accept it. However, we need more details. We have to avoid any chance of you being detained in the Twin Kingdoms for more than a year."

The word "detained" made it sound rather chilling, but it wasn't as dangerous as it sounded. The leaders of the country were by no means foolish enough to physically restrain him within the country. Instead, they would treat him well enough that he would remain out of his own free will. Still, Aura wanted to avoid him spending too much time there.

"Ah, yeah. Fiqriya and Talajeh have both invited me to their territories," Zenjirou recalled with a rueful smile.

Their two families—the Animeeums and Elementaccatos—were the two ducal families that had settled and had static capitals for their territories. The Animeeum's was on a huge salt lake, while the Elementaccato's was established near a massive gold mine. The main issue with both of them was their locations deep in the desert, so coming and going from the capital was a significant undertaking.

The two women's invitations would mean that he could teleport to either

location directly, and he could understand their desire for that.

Her husband's amusement must have been contagious because Aura offered a huff of amusement herself before speaking.

"It is only natural they would wish for that considering their positions. However, there is an order to such things; if you are visiting mines in foreign lands, you should have at least visited our own first."

"Right, the silver mine in Potosi. The only place I can visit myself in the west is Valentia. I'll visit it at some point to take a photo," he chuckled.

The capital they called home was—roughly speaking—in the center of the country. There were important locations in all compass directions. To the east was Fort Montjuïc. To the west was the port city of Valentia. To the south was the mining city of Potosi. Finally, to the north was the old capital, now the capital of the Lara family's territory.

Each of the four was a vital location to the country, and they were also perfect points to split the country into four. The Capua family's gift of teleportation could fundamentally be used to visit anywhere a specific member had been before, but it could only be used if they could form a clear mental image of the location.

Therefore, the royal family prioritized those four locations as places to link the capital via teleportation.

Since Zenjirou's first location after the capital was the capital of the Twin Kingdoms, and the one after that was the capital of Uppasala, his destinations had expanded in a rather unique way compared to the norm. He couldn't put off the four main locations in his homeland forever. The only one of them he currently had was Valentia, and it would be for the best if the other three were among his possible destinations. For Zenjirou, he had the advantage of his camera, so if he visited at least once to take a picture, he should be able to cope in the future.

"We're getting a bit off-topic, but essentially we're going to accept, right?"

"Indeed." Aura nodded. "It will be more work for you, but the opportunity is too good to pass up."

“Got it. Maybe I should set the music player recording while I’m at it?”

Aura immediately understood the implication and considered it before shaking her head. “No, we should avoid that. It is rather tempting, but stealing their incantations will not end well. We would be better served by an official contract to gain them.”

Capua currently had Carlos Zenkichi as someone with the lineal magic of enchantment running in their veins. If Zenjirou gained a concubine from the Sharou family as well, then there would likely be more of them on the way as well. The issue that then arose was that while they would have people capable of casting the spells, those people would be unable to do so without already knowing the incantations.

Capua also had Espiridion, a powerhouse of magic research, so it would not be impossible to develop the spells themselves. Still, it would be much better to have the Sharou family teach them to begin with. Stealing the incantations like Zenjirou had implied would lead to friction in the future. Considering that, an official agreement would be for the best. Using the recorder as a learning tool would be perfect, but doing so without permission would lead to far too many problems further down the line and wasn’t the best choice for them to make.

After parsing all of that, Aura was somewhat taken aback. “I must say, I am rather surprised to hear such a suggestion from you, Zenjirou. It seems unlike you to offer such dishonest methods.”

Zenjirou shifted guiltily. “Yeah, well, I’m kinda anxious, I guess.”

Aura’s expression grew graver at that. “Anxious? Well, impressions from people directly on the scene are vital.”

Any anxiety from Zenjirou would be due to what he had seen of the Northern Continent’s development. Considering he had seen it with his own eyes, Aura’s position as queen meant that she could not just dismiss it out of hand.

“Very well. We shall focus more on it,” she said.

Aura felt that she was aware of the threat the Northern Continent posed by taking into account the information from Zenjirou and Freya as well as the photos of the city. However, she still wasn’t as anxious about things as Zenjirou.

That was why despite the “honesty” of the discussion with Bruno, it had still been them feeling each other out and shifting things for their individual benefit.

Naturally, the honesty itself wasn’t a lie. Compared to the norm, it had been an awfully frank discussion. The discussion itself had been worthwhile. However...

“Perhaps we took it too lightly,” Aura murmured.



Several days later, in the early morning, the gardens of the inner palace were home to a somewhat odd sight. There were two creatures within them that were far from the general vibes of the area.

“Seeing them from up close, they really are large. I’ve ridden in carriages several times, but this is the first time I’ve been in touching distance of one of the drakes,” came Freya’s excited voice.

Exactly as they had expected, once Freya had heard about Aura and Zenjirou holding a lesson in the gardens, Freya had practically leaped at the chance.

Aura, Freya, and Zenjirou were all not in their usual dresses and traditional outfits. Instead, they were wearing clothes that were easy to move in for riding. Skaji was wearing the same, but that was her normal type of dress.

Seeing both his wives wearing pants again made him offer honest compliments—albeit after a moment’s hesitation.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you wearing that kind of outfit, Aura. You still seem right at home in it, though. Freya, I saw you in your captain’s uniform a lot during the trip, but I think the last time I saw you in that outfit was in the Gaziel March? It suits you.”

While he meant what he said, actually saying it aloud was purposeful. Interacting with both of his wives at the same time, Zenjirou was rather nervous and wary. He had already experienced similar feelings in the public eye several times, but doing so in the private area of the inner palace was honestly rather nerve-racking.

Neither of the two women was dense enough to miss his thinking, but

fortunately, neither was insensitive enough to follow up on it. Both accepted his clumsy praise with their own replies.

“Thank you. It does not hurt on occasion, does it?”

“Thank you, Sir Zenjirou. I would personally rather wear this kind of thing normally, but if I got too used to it, I could make a mistake during public functions, so I usually take more care.”

While Zenjirou breathed a sigh of relief, the two women exchanged quick glances. Both of them had considered a joking competition with each other, but they could tell that Zenjirou wasn't in a position where he'd be able to take it as humor. The look they exchanged was an agreement to take things seriously, be cordial, and only focus on the lesson itself. With that promise in place, the two did their best to follow it.

“It is still the blazing season, so we have little time. I suggest we start immediately if everyone is willing?” Aura asked.

Zenjirou hadn't seen the exchange between the two and just nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense. It's plenty hot already, so we can't spend too long out here.”

During the blazing season, the hours around noon were for rest, which meant the only times you could be physically active were in the early morning and the late evenings before the sun set.

There were fountains across the gardens, so it was cooler than other areas but—disregarding the area directly around them—it was within the margin of error overall.

“In which case, let's get started straight away,” Freya pressed cheerily. She was the least able to deal with the heat of anyone present.

Zenjirou had expected as much, but she seemed to be rather looking forward to learning the lesson. Considering he didn't really wish to learn how to ride but instead *needed* to, her reaction was somewhat overwhelming for him.

The absolute first step when learning how to ride was learning how to mount the drake. Just as Aura had told him, the dash drake was very intelligent and knelt down in front of Zenjirou, bending its neck to make it as easy as possible to climb on. It was still extremely tall, though. Dash drakes were several times

larger than the biggest of horses to begin with. Even kneeling down like it was, the only way Zenjirou could describe getting up was by “clambering.” Using the stirrups and short rope ladder hanging from the saddle, he managed to make his way up.

Zenjirou couldn't believe the short ladder worked like stabilizers for a bike, where once someone had learned to ride, they didn't need it anymore. It seemed that to really master the skill, you needed to be able to jump at least sixty centimeters into the air.

“Ah, guh...”

“What is it? Are you okay?” Aura asked with concern from the two-person saddle as Zenjirou stifled a groan in front of her.

Aura was there as guidance and assistance, so she was sitting behind him. Dash drakes were sturdy and strong enough that in terms of both space and weight, two adults were no concern. The Southern Continent's climate meant that people didn't wear metal armor, but a dash drake could still carry a fully laden knight over long distances. The combined weight of both Zenjirou and Aura was no concern at all.

The reason for his groan was simply that it felt like his crotch was about to split. Sitting on top of a large animal was completely different than doing the same with a bike or motorbike. A horse's back was much wider than a saddle for either vehicle, and the drake's was wider still. As a result, Zenjirou's legs were wide enough apart that he'd have almost sworn he heard an ominous sound coming from between them.

“I-I'm fine, but my legs...”

“Are in the wrong place,” Aura picked up. “You should not sit with them straight, instead put both of your knees further forward and lower yourself, like you were sitting in a chair.”

Zenjirou corrected his posture following her advice and was in a slightly more comfortable position. However, moving his knees forward made him feel like his upper body was going to fall back. Aura seemed to realize that as he looked back and she put a hand on his shoulder.

“You are fine. You will not fall back. You do not simply fall backwards if you use a stool with no back, do you? If by some chance you do fall, I will catch you.”

“Ah, yeah. Thanks, Aura.”

He was somewhat embarrassed about needing her to help with everything, but his voice wasn't as tense anymore and he managed to relax his muscles slightly.

“Good. Now you need the drake to stand. Do you remember how?”

Zenjirou thought back to the commands he had already learned. “Yeah, I do... Stand!”

As he said the last words, he tapped his heels against the drake's flank from where they were in the stirrups.

Dash drakes responded very well to their rider's commands.

“Whoa!”

“It is okay, this drake is well trained. You would normally never fall.”

Indeed, the drake had stood up in a rather unnatural way, making things as easy as possible for its rider. It shifted from having its legs bent to straight, while keeping the saddle on its back almost perfectly level. This was clearly done to ease the burden on the rider rather than because that was how it would naturally get up.

Incidentally, drakes used in the military were selected for their temperament and running ability, so they were not trained like this. Therefore, it was not uncommon for them to shift quickly to the left and right as they stood up. If the rider fell from the momentary rodeo, it was considered the rider who was at fault, not the drake.

Despite that, even the special training this drake had was a worthy challenge for Zenjirou, who had never ridden before. As to what the challenge itself was, that would be its height. A normal horse was about 170 centimeters tall, but a dash drake was another 50 centimeters taller than that. Considering he was sitting over two meters in the air on an unstable surface, it was hardly a surprise

an unfamiliar rider would be afraid.

With the soft support of his wife's hand on his back, Zenjirou managed to steady himself.

"Are you settled?" Aura asked. "If you feel ready, you can have it walk."

Zenjirou took a deep breath, centering himself before giving the drake its next command. "R-Right. Forward!"

As he called out the command, he lightly used his right heel to tap at the drake's side.

The intelligent dash drake began slowly walking off. While Zenjirou and Aura were taking care of the former's first ride, Freya and Skaji were watching silently. There was another drake there, so they could learn at the same time if they were using the two maids who also had the skill. However, they hesitated to do that.

Learning from just a maid with her confidant was too depressing while Zenjirou was having fun with his wife. There were occasions where emotions should be prioritized, even if it was somewhat less efficient.

Freya's gaze followed Zenjirou and Aura as the drake walked, turned, stopped, and set off again. While it was somewhat rude of her to think it, he was doing better than she had expected.

"Perhaps it's fairly similar to riding a horse," she commented.

"It seems to have a lot in common," Skaji agreed. "You may end up learning faster than me, in fact."

The Uppasalan horses were on the larger side for horses, so even Skaji—who was relatively bulky for a woman—could ride while fully equipped. However, it still was the case that riders did better if they were smaller and lighter. Horseback riding was, therefore, one of the few pursuits in which the princess outstripped her retainer.

Freya knew that, but she still considered it fully before eventually offering a calm conclusion. "I am not so sure about that. I only do better than you due to my size. In terms of actual skill, you are better. With a dash drake, I can see that

becoming the case as well.”

Dash drakes were bigger and hardier than horses, so much so that no horse could hold a candle to them in strength. There was not a single dash drake that wasn't capable of carrying even Pujol's two-meter frame, so Skaji should be nothing to them.

“It is tempting to think that way. However, they seem more intelligent than I had expected. They seem to understand what we're saying, even.”

The middle-aged maid holding the other drake's reins offered an easy agreement. “They do. While it is only the case for particularly intelligent drakes, some can be commanded with just verbal instructions alone.” After she said that, the maid spoke to the drake itself. “Head down.”

The drake then lowered its head from its initially towering viewpoint to the maid's eye level.

“Good drake,” she told it, stroking its head.

The drake let out a pleased trill as it closed its eyes.

“Incredible. Can I stroke it too?” Freya asked with sparkling eyes.

The drake's response was even more surprising to them than its earlier actions. With a grunt, it twisted to hold its head out to Freya.

“Huh?”

“Well now, that is a surprise,” Skaji remarked.

The maid smiled softly at their widened eyes. “Please go ahead. Because of its intelligence and temperament, this drake is particularly friendly.”

“Ah, of course,” Freya replied, stroking the drake's head. Its skin was smoother and more pleasant to the touch than she had expected. The heat of its skin was likely due to the sunlight beaming down on it. All drakes on the Southern Continent—not just the dash drakes—were cold-blooded; their body temperatures changed with their environment, as did their activity levels.

“It really is intelligent,” she remarked, impressed as she continued to run her hand over its head.

The drake made a rolling noise in its throat as if to wave off the praise.

“Dash drakes that are this intelligent *are* rather rare. Drakes that are this well-tempered are even rarer. Conversely, drakes that are intelligent but unfriendly are a real issue.”

“Ah, I can understand that.”

“That would be a problem,” Skaji added.

Both of them could see exactly where the maid was coming from. This was the first time they’d been near a dash drake, but both of them had experience with horses. Horses had their own personalities and different levels of capability. Because of that, they knew just how much of an issue an intelligent—but belligerent—animal could be. In some ways, they were even harder to deal with than animals that were both unintelligent and unfriendly.

While it was hard to train an unintelligent animal, even those animals would follow their training once it was done. Because of their lack of intelligence, they couldn’t think of disobeying. Additionally, they couldn’t tell people apart and would mostly follow commands from anyone once they had been trained.

However, intelligent animals were incredible at telling the difference between people. That distinction then led to a difference in behavior. Those they liked would find themselves obeyed to an almost shocking degree, while those they didn’t would be made utter fools of, not obeyed in the slightest. Additionally, if an amateur gave the wrong command by mistake, they would essentially launch into carrying it out, enjoying making life difficult for the humans.

While that conversation was going on, Zenjirou and Aura had finished their initial lesson.

“Stop,” Zenjirou said, pulling on the reins. The dash drake followed the order, stopping. However, if you had been watching closely you would have noticed that it had begun to stop before Zenjirou had actually pulled on the reins, just after he’d given the command.

“Um...is that a problem?” Freya found herself quietly asking the maid at her side.

She thought that surely the drake obeying with just the verbal command

wasn't good for learning how to actually ride one.

The maid answered just as quietly. "It is fine to begin with. The main thing to start is learning what it feels like to have the drake moving as you wish."

That was possibly something that Freya didn't truly understand. While she was slight for her Svean blood, she was very active and just as courageous. That meant that she had no reservations about riding either a horse or a drake. However, most people would feel some level of fear at riding such a massive creature.

That was why dash drakes that were very accommodating were used to begin with, to ease the fear of riding them. It wasn't an incorrect way of doing things, but it did mean that you had to progress to learning how to handle a "normal" dash drake or you could end up taking things too lightly and getting hurt.

That was hardly likely to be a concern for Zenjirou, though. He was still nervous even getting down from the standing drake.

"Good work, Sir Zenjirou," Freya said, taking the towel offered by the insightful maid as she jogged over to him once he finally managed to get down.

Chapter 4 — The Next Steps

That afternoon, Aura was on an island owned by the Capuan royal family. Alone.

She had purposefully chosen the hottest period of the day—despite it still being the blazing season—for the same reason that she was alone. That reason was to keep her actions here as secret as possible.

The island itself was one of the largest that the royal family personally owned, but the ocean currents made it unsuitable for both fishing and trade. It had therefore remained uninhabited. The Capuan royal family used it instead for magic experiments that they wanted to keep secret.

While the royals themselves usually used it, there were occasions when other mages would get permission as well. Espiridion—the head of the country’s mages—and his wife, Pasquala, were regulars here. A particularly rare group was when Carlos II—who had been a skilled mage and researcher—would come here each time he thought up a new spell, accompanied by a trusted maid.

The queen was standing on this rather storied island with a small marble in her hand. It was gripped between her index finger, her middle finger, and her thumb, and formed the basis of the flameburst magic tool she had commissioned from Francesco in secret. The marble was caged within a metal frame, and one of its eight vertices was colored red.

Aura carefully positioned the frame with its red corner facing out, making sure there was no way it was even close to pointing at her. She found herself slipping into the calm usually associated with casting magic and purposefully shook that off. Instead, she focused her thoughts on other matters as far from magic as she could before speaking the activation word.

“Conflagrate.”



A beat later, her vision was swallowed by red. As the incantation suggested, the air on the island was filled with roaring flames of crimson. Aura only maintained her cool due to already being proficient with the spell. She had cast it under her own power before without the assistance of a magic tool. Therefore, the sight itself was no shock to her. It was also only active for a scarce few instants. Once its effects ran their course, the only signs of it were a slightly warmer area and a few scorch marks on the ground.

Flameburst was a spell that Aura had used on many occasions, so she was familiar with both its effects and force. She had cast it in an open space and relatively high into the air so that the flames didn't catch on any of the plants in the area.

Ideally, she would cast it on some form of physical target like trees or rocks to see exactly how destructive it was, but she was confident on that front. The trees on the Southern Continent had a rather high water content and wouldn't catch alight easily, but the risk was still present. Aura would find it rather difficult to extinguish any such fire on her own.

Either way, the test itself had been a success. Still, Aura's expression remained completely placid.

"I thought of things that were wholly unrelated and simply pronounced the activation word correctly. I did not even need to regulate the mana flow because it was a magic tool, it seems. It is on a completely different level of convenience than casting the spell under my own power."

Capua possessed several magic tools like the healing stones or the carpet she had lent Zenjirou, but none of them had been offensive in nature before now. As far as Aura was aware, at least, this object was the first of its kind that Capua owned.

Her impression of it could simply be summed up as "a threat." To cast magic, one needed the correct pronunciation, the correct amount of mana, and the correct visualization. Therefore, it required an inhumanly strong force of will to cast magic on the battlefield. Even people who could cast large-scale spells from the relatively safe rear lines were rather rare. As far as people who could cast spells while in the midst of active combat, Aura was only aware of three in total,

including Skaji from Uppasala. That was just how difficult casting in battle was.

And yet, with a magic tool, one only needed the first of the three normal prerequisites: the pronunciation. While it was not so simple that literally anyone could do it, any soldier trained in their use would certainly be capable.

“While few in number, these can be produced in larger amounts over a month.”

Aura shivered where she stood in the mix of the residual heat from the flameburst as well as the season.

“The battlefield will be unrecognizable,” she muttered to herself with surety. Even so, she could think of several upsides. “Actually using it in its current form on the battlefield is dangerous, though.”

The marble was simply held in a metal frame, which made it small and easy to carry. However, to use it, one had to make sure the red corner was facing in the right direction, which made things slightly more difficult. While it was practically a nonissue when you could use it calmly, the battlefield was not known for being somewhere to patiently take your time with aiming. Anyone could see that in its current form, it would cause accidents.

There were two ways to solve this. The first was to add a targeting effect into the magic tool itself. Rather than the orientation of the tool dictating where the spell went, it was relatively simple to make a magic tool use the person’s eyeline or visualization to decide how the spell was targeted. In fact, the healing stones were made in that way. If not, the potential of a miscast would lead to potential tragedy.

Doing this caused two problems. One of them was that extra complications in the enchantment made the tool cost more. Francesco had created this one in a single day, but adding in a dependence on eyeline or visualization would have taken at least three, even with the marble. For just one or two of them, a difference of two days wasn’t much, but when you were making a limited number, it added up.

The second issue was that making it reliant on the user’s visualization added more of a burden to the user. Aura had experienced how much the battlefield caused tunnel vision and slowing of thought for herself. To make it as widely

usable as possible meant making it rely as little as possible on its users' capabilities.

The other solution was even more simple. You could simply fix it at the end of a short staff. Doing that would mean the fire would always come from the staff's tip. The issue here was also plain to see. Short though it might have been, it would be a staff and so inevitably bulkier.

The vision that Aura had for the mass-produced tools was currently a collection of single-use magic tools. That meant that the more that could be carried at once, the better.

A framed marble meant that a single person could carry dozens of them. Putting them on a staff, though, would significantly curtail that number, however small the staves were made. Considering they would be carried around on the battlefield, a soldier likely couldn't even carry ten of them. Carrying them in the carriages in the same way as arrows for archers changed things, though.

"With the only enchanters belonging to other countries, perhaps we should develop things using our own techniques for now," she mused.

With that conclusion made, Aura looked up at the sun where it hung, still high in the sky. The sunlight at noon during the blazing season was enough of a threat for even those born and raised on the Southern Continent. With the years spent with the air conditioning in her bedroom, it was even harder for Aura to endure.

"Time to return, I suppose," she said before casting the teleportation spell and rendering the island completely deserted yet again.



While Aura was conducting private magic experiments, Zenjirou was in a gazebo in the palace gardens. There were no walls, just a thin ceiling. A breeze was also constantly going over a nearby fountain into the area, so it was relatively bearable even in the middle of the blazing season. He and Lucretia Broglie—of the noble family of the same name from the Twin Kingdoms—were taking lunch there.

“One of the things I learned on our journey was that being able to simply sit and drink water like this is something to be thankful for,” Lucretia murmured earnestly as she took a polite sip of her drink.

Zenjirou’s lips quirked as he agreed. “Quite right. I wager you and I were roughly on par for the number of times we spilled water on ourselves.”

Drinking liquids while the sea at large was raging was something that required focus to do. While the ship having several people who could cast water purification—and a magic tool to do the same—made it a funny joke, normally even guests would be punished for wasting as much water as the two of them had done.

“The one silver lining was the lack of seasickness,” he added.

“Agreed.”

Flora, the maid standing behind Lucretia, cleared her throat softly at that. At the same time, the knight behind Zenjirou—Natalio—looked away guiltily. The two of them had also been part of the voyage on the *Glasisir’s Leaf*. Unfortunately, they also both belonged to the group of people who had gotten seasick. While they were here as an attendant and guard, respectively, and therefore not supposed to offer personal remarks, that strictness had relaxed significantly during the voyage.

Of course, Zenjirou and Lucretia were also closer than they had been at the start of the trip, which might prove to be a good thing in the future. The situation they were in was like a castle with its moat almost filled in.

Zenjirou couldn’t remove his dislike of the situation, considering he already had a wife in Aura and had just recently obtained a *second* wife in Freya, but the situation didn’t permit those feelings. In that respect, the increased closeness between the two of them could be considered a positive. Even if it did feel to Zenjirou like enemy after enemy were charging over his filled-in moat.

“However, the main thing I remember of the voyage has to be the views of the countries on the Northern Continent,” Zenjirou commented.

“Indeed. The commonwealth had a real impact,” Lucretia agreed.

The commonwealth, or as it was officially known, The Noble’s Commonwealth

of Złota Wolność... Zenjirou almost jumped as he heard the name come from Lucretia's lips, but he somehow managed to rein in his reaction. The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle were descendants of the White Empire and potential enemies of the Noble's Commonwealth of Złota Wolność. Zenjirou and the others only knew that because Lucretia had told them of it.

Lucretia's impressions of the commonwealth were almost certainly going to have hidden elements to them. Still, where a knight and maid could overhear was not the place to talk about such matters.

"The town we saw certainly did draw the eye. I am a complete outsider when it comes to architecture but even I could tell it was constructed differently than here."

"It was a very pretty town, yes."

The majority of the time the two of them had spent together was on their trip to the Northern Continent. Therefore, much of what they could share a conversation over was inevitably to do with the time spent on the ship or on the continent itself.

Such conversation flowing so well could be considered progress for Zenjirou, and a conquest for Lucretia. However, the change in the political climate was unfortunately rather quicker than this. Therefore, the conversation needed to be pushed along, even if it was something of a strain.

"I believe Princess Margarita has arrived recently," Zenjirou said, bringing up someone who "just happened" to be related to Lucretia. He was somewhat nervous about what kind of reaction he would get, but her response was calmer than he had expected.

"Indeed. I have met her once and offered my greetings."

"I see." His surprise at the lack of real reaction must have shown because the blonde girl smiled slightly.

"It was thanks to Princess Margarita that these situations have gone well, so I wanted to at least convey my gratitude," she added, directing her blue eyes very blatantly towards Zenjirou's right wrist. Wrapped around the joint was a rough bracelet made of dull gray metal. It was a strong magic tool with a name:

The Windhammer. This gift from Margarita had been a real boon to Zenjirou.

As repayment for the gift, she had asked that he accept three of Lucretia's requests. Considering her statement, the girl herself must have known the particulars. By blood, Lucretia and Margarita were sisters, but on paper, they were complete strangers. Emotionally, though, it seemed that they saw each other as sisters. Therefore he could understand why Lucretia would have wanted to convey her gratitude. However, he could not see how that connected to seeing her *once* and offering greetings.

Lucretia gave a reluctant smile at his question and explained. "Princess Margarita is here due to her desire to apprentice under Sir Völundr. The best way to show how grateful I am is to impinge as little on the time she has with him as possible."

"Ah, I see," Zenjirou answered in realization.

Indeed, she was spoken of similarly to Francesco within the Sharou family as one of the best young enchanters. There were also rumors that her exploits were on the same level as his.

Speaking of rumors, Zenjirou had something else to ask about. "Now that I think about it, I have heard that you have been present at more lunches and dinners than before. Is that perhaps part of your thanks?"

She offered a bashful look. "It is. As part of my gratitude, I am attending in her place for the invitations where that is possible."

"That cannot be easy," he remarked, honestly impressed.

While she may have married down into a branch family, Margarita was still a respected royal famed for her skill in enchanting. The burden on Lucretia—who was nothing more than a noble girl from an influential family—was clearly different. The disappointment of inviting a member of a royal family only to be met by a normal noble would be palpable even if they tried to hide it. There was a strong possibility of any such meetings becoming rather awkward.

However, there had been no reports of Lucretia causing issues at lunches or banquets. In other words, she had managed to safely navigate the role of unwanted substitute. She was clearly exceptionally happy with his praise as she

straightened.

“Well, such things are my specialty,” she answered.

That was entirely the truth. While she wasn’t as adept as a diplomat, Lucretia excelled in making sure that whoever was holding an event enjoyed it. Of course, her rather blatant flattery of men in the Twin Kingdoms had led to her being relatively unpopular with women. Fortunately, though, she wasn’t seen in that way in Capua, so she was well-liked by both men and women alike.

“It is impressive,” Zenjirou insisted. “It is honestly something I rather struggle with.”

The complaint slipped from his lips. He had accompanied Lucretia as her partner several times in both the Twin Kingdoms and the commonwealth, so she was likely well aware of his struggles in such situations. Still, her response wasn’t quite what he had expected.

“Is that so? As far as I can recall, you have always comported yourself as well as you should. If you’ll pardon me, is it perhaps not that you ‘struggle’ with it, but that you ‘dislike’ it?”

The uncharacteristically sharp comment from her prompted a wry look of amusement to flit over Zenjirou’s face.

“That is rather hard to dispute,” he admitted.

While it was something he personally felt that he *did* struggle with, if he had to pick which description suited him best, he would have to agree that it was the latter.

With the conversation in full flow and a sense of camaraderie established, Zenjirou turned not to Lucretia, but to the maid and knight who were also present, telling them that he had something important to discuss with Lucretia.

Both of them had already assumed that was the purpose of the meeting, so they merely offered bows before leaving them. Flora was Lucretia’s confidante, and Natalio was both Zenjirou’s knight and the leader of his knights who came with his position as Duke Bilbo. Because of that, it was perhaps a rather pointless formality, but the niceties had to be observed.

When he was sure the two of them had gone, Zenjirou straightened again and spoke quietly. “I want you to answer me truthfully, Lucy. Do you still wish to become my concubine?”

Lucretia answered in kind, her voice barely audible. “Yes. Of course.”

Whatever else might be the case, Lucretia had spent a rather large amount of time with Zenjirou, so she could tell that he was not particularly welcoming of concubines. She could therefore feel the situation developing, with him being willing to open up like this between the two of them.

She seemed to feel it was a do-or-die moment and leaned swiftly over the table to plead her case. “It is my greatest wish and I will do anything I can to make it a reality.”

Her enthusiasm was honest, but the words themselves were not. Therefore, even as he nodded along, Zenjirou pointed out the discrepancy.

“I would assume that your actual greatest wish is to return to the Sharou family. Becoming my concubine is simply a means to an end.”

Lucretia was born into the family, but due to a lack of their lineal magic, she was transferred to the Broglie family soon after birth. Looking at the country’s history as a whole, this was not without precedent. That precedent also defined the single method by which the adopted offspring could be considered part of their birth family again: marrying into royalty.

In such a case, it was not that the person was considered royalty again by dint of their marriage; rather, they were transferred back to the family rolls of their birth family before the actual marriage. The main reason for this was to prevent a noble family from having excessive influence over the royal family, but that renaming was Lucretia’s only true desire.

Ordinarily, the royal family in question would need to be the Sharou family. On the Southern Continent, being part of a royal family meant you maintained its lineal magic, so marrying a foreign royal was taboo. Zenjirou was an exception to that, however. He was a descendant of a prince of the Capua family as well as a princess of the Sharou family, so it was not a risk at this point.

The Sharou family lusted for the Capua family's space-time magic, while the Capua family lusted for the Sharou family's enchantment. There was a secret contract between the two families, which essentially allowed Zenjirou to have a concubine who possessed that lineage. In fact, it was less that it "allowed" it and more that it "endorsed" it.

That was why Lucretia wished to become Zenjirou's concubine. It was—fundamentally—just a means to an end.

"If a man from the Sharou family made you an offer, I assume you would not particularly object, would you?"

That prompted Lucretia to flounder. If his expression was one of discomfort, it would be a relief for her. It would imply he had some form of attachment to her. However, there was not an iota of discomfort or jealousy. Instead, it was an earnest expression, as if he was honestly considering her goals, which in turn meant that he had no real desire to take her as his concubine. That was why she floundered.

"Well, I am of course a noble family's daughter. If my adoptive father or His Majesty brought such a suggestion to me, I would not refuse it. However, if I had the privilege to choose for myself, I would still prefer to marry you."

That was a considerable shock to Zenjirou. He did not particularly look down on himself. Of course, he was not arrogant about his charms as a man, but he knew that his position alone would have people seeing him as a "good match." His appearance and skills aside, he did not think of himself as a *bad* catch, and even if he didn't consider himself a *good* husband, he would do his best to be an accommodating one.

However, the assumptions were different for Lucretia. She held lingering desires to be with her birth family. Becoming Zenjirou's concubine would see her being officially part of that family again, but physically they would be split between both the western and central regions of the Southern Continent.

Conversely, if she married someone from the Sharou family, she would both be returned to her original family and able to live with easy access to them by being in the same city. Zenjirou was sure that the latter would be a far more attractive prospect to her.

“You would?” he asked. “Surely your goals would be achieved with someone from the Sharou family?”

“I believe I have investigated all of the potential prospects from the Sharou family. When I compare all of the prospects I have, I would choose you.”

As she spoke, Lucretia offered the most charming smile she had, one she had spent many an occasion practicing. Her words were not a lie, but nor were they the truth.

With the amount of time she had spent with him, Lucretia did have some level of affection for Zenjirou. It was more affection than she had for any of the men from the Sharou family. In that respect, what she had said was not a lie. However, Zenjirou’s comments perfectly hit on the issue with that. Lucretia’s main goal was her birth family. With that taken into account, any affection for either him or the men of the Sharou family was practically a rounding error.

Still, the reason she so desperately wanted to become Zenjirou’s concubine was exceptionally simple. With things having progressed as far as they had, she had no real prospects with anyone else. It was the former and current kings who had decided to offer someone with the Sharou bloodline to Zenjirou. Lucretia had offered herself up as a piece in that game and couldn’t just pull out now. If she were to fail to win him over, she would likely be married off to some other noble at the royal family’s convenience. She had bet it all on Zenjirou.

While he was not aware of the exact details, her zeal was clearly conveyed to him.

“I see. It is an honor,” he remarked. Now that he had obtained confirmation that she was still aiming to become his concubine, Zenjirou continued the conversation.

“Do you have any thoughts as to how you wish your life to go after you are married?”

It had taken quite the amount of courage for Zenjirou to verbalize the question. After all, asking it suggested that he was considering having her as a concubine.

As expected, Lucretia took those words in the most positive way possible and

answered briskly as she leaned forward.

“I would take things as they are given.”

In other words, it would all be up to Zenjirou. That was likely the answer any normal royal or noble from this world would want to hear. Unfortunately, though, all that did was pile on even more pressure for Zenjirou.

“Does that mean that you have no clear desires for how your life would be after your marriage?” he asked.

“Marriage itself would be offering myself up, so I would simply behave as my husband wished,” she answered, dashing his hopes of a refusal and solidifying his premonition.

So she just wants to leave it all to me...

If he could, he'd have dropped his head into his hands there. Frankly, Lucretia had done nothing wrong here. Men from this world would have appreciated her statements as “a woman who knew her place.” If anything, her behavior would be taken as too good to be true and they'd be expecting her to be plotting something for after the marriage.

However, Zenjirou was fundamentally different from the norm in that sense. Both he and the men of this world wanted a happy marriage of some kind if they had to be married regardless. The difference was what made “a happy marriage” for them.

For the men of this world, they would be the ones to decide what a happy marriage was. It was simply seen as a natural right for them. No, in fact, it was just seen as the way things were, not even requiring any thought or verbalization.

Therefore, they would appreciate someone like Lucretia leaving all of those decisions to them because it would mean that they could continue to act as they pleased even after marriage.

Conversely, a happy marriage for Zenjirou was something built together by both husband and wife, so it required dialogue and understanding between both parties. Therefore, Lucretia's behavior of not voicing any of her own desires was just an extra burden for him. It was like the difference between a

guy who, when his date told him that she didn't mind wherever they went, thought, "Hell yeah, I get to go where I like and have some fun with the food I want" and a guy whose thoughts were more like, "Ack, I need to choose somewhere that'll make her happy without any hints. This is kinda tough."

With Zenjirou's primary focus being ensuring the happiness of the woman who would be his wife, having everything be up to him was just a burden. Although Lucretia couldn't necessarily understand the completely alien thinking, she could tell that what she was saying wasn't having a good effect.

"Um, Your Majesty?" she asked worriedly.

Zenjirou pasted a smile onto his face. "It's nothing. This is just for reference, so I don't want you to think too hard about it. How would you see your ideal marriage going, Lucy?"

Her big blue eyes blinked at hearing the question again before she thought about it somewhat more seriously than before. "I cannot really think of anything particularly special," she told him.

"That is fine. It needn't be special, just as specific as you can."

"Very well. Then, hmm, I suppose I would want to live peacefully in the inner palace in general."

Zenjirou was already dreading what was to come, but he kept up a faint hope and listened regardless. "Hm, and what else?" he pressed.

Lucretia continued, completely innocently. "If I could ask for whatever I wished, then I would wish to spend time with whomever I married several times a year. Otherwise, I would just fulfill my duties as a noble wife."

It was the most nonspecific and safest answer a noblewoman would give for her married life.

"I see. Thank you. That was helpful," Zenjirou managed to answer. Her answer had made things clear to him.

So, the marriage itself is Lucy's only real goal. She has no plans for anything after that. She's just decided that she will be happy after the marriage, he thought to himself.

Lucretia was—for Zenjirou, with his general disposition of wanting whoever he married to be as happy as possible—the hardest type of person to create a happy marriage with.



The next day, in the early afternoon, Zenjirou was in the living room of the inner palace. Aura was there too, and so were the maids assigned to the main building, waiting in the background. So far, none of that was unusual. If anything, it was entirely the norm.

What departed from the norm was that Freya and Skaji were both also present.

“What is this called?” Freya asked, her short silver hair swishing this way and that as her gaze darted around the room. At her side, Skaji wasn’t showing her emotions quite as clearly. However, she was inspecting the room full of unfamiliar appliances with a warrior’s calm wariness.

Aura chuckled. “I suppose much of it would be unfamiliar to you. They are all my husband’s personal effects. Get an explanation from him later. For now, though, would you take a seat?” she offered, gesturing at a sofa.

“Of course, pardon me,” Freya replied, tearing her curious gaze from the electrical goods and sitting down on the leather sofa.

“My apologies, Lady Skaji, but I would ask you to leave,” Aura continued.

“Very well. Excuse me,” the warrior replied before moving to the exit.

The conversation that was about to take place was for royals and the members of the household. Even Skaji—despite being treated generally the same as the maids—was not allowed to hear everything. The decision of whether she would be informed later would rest with Freya.

Skaji offered a bow before stepping out of the room. Aura watched her leave, then sat down on the same sofa as Freya, and Zenjirou sat right on the middle of the opposite sofa, opposite them on his own.

The blazing season was still not over, so he would have rather been shut up in the bedroom with its air conditioning than in the living room with just the fan

and ice, but that would be excessive. While Zenjirou had a relationship that saw him sharing a bed with both women, it was too soon to be inviting both of them to his bedroom at the same time.

One of the maids placed iced fruit juice in metal chalices for each of them. Ordinarily, Zenjirou and Aura would use the two faceted glasses of different colors. There were only the two of those, though, so they went unused this time. Zenjirou and Aura using matching glasses while Freya alone had to use a normal metal chalice would have been immensely rude considering her position.

Once the two women facing him had sipped their drinks, Zenjirou started the conversation off.

“Ah, well, I’ve already mentioned, but I’d like us to have periodic discussions here from now on. They’ll be to discuss opinions, information, and how we are feeling. They’ll also be as sincere as possible.”

His two wives had already been informed of this, but they offered smiling nods regardless.

“Understood, Zenjirou,” Aura said.

“I understand, Sir Zenjirou.”

This meeting was a trial for adding Freya to the periodic discussions that Zenjirou and Aura had held for quite some time in the inner palace’s living room. With Freya now being a concubine of his, it was practically inevitable that the two-way conversations would become three-way. However, his addition of the “as possible” qualifier was because they would never be as frank as the two-person discussions had been.

While Freya was now his concubine and therefore part of the Capuan royal family, her history as part of the Uppasalan royal family had by no means been erased. The difference in position between the three meant that there would have to be things that were held back.

Regardless, it was Zenjirou who spoke first. “I met Lucretia yesterday. She’s still just as set on her path and wanting to become my concubine.”

That report had prompted this specific meeting. It had only been a month

since he had married Freya and he was meeting—in private—with someone wanting to be his next concubine. His first wife, Aura, had moved things forward on that front, and Freya had given her approval. But despite that, Zenjirou couldn't avoid the awkward feelings of guilt over discussing a rendezvous with someone else seeking such a relationship. Remaining silent would have made him feel even more guilty, however, so he explained everything with no dissembling at all.

“And that's the sum of it,” he finished up. “She even went as far to say she'd rather become my concubine than marry someone from the Sharou family. I don't know what's given her such a good impression, though.”

His redheaded wife and silver-haired concubine shared a guilty look over their drinks.

“Uh, what's that about?” Zenjirou asked, noticing it.

After a brief nonverbal debate fought with looks, it was Aura who spoke up in resignation.

“Ah, well, to put it rather bluntly...I *assume* that she has no chance of actually doing so—marrying someone from the Sharou family, that is.”

“Huh?”

The queen kept her voice matter-of-fact as she continued. “Offering you a concubine from the Sharou bloodline was at the behest of both the prior and present kings. As the queen of Capua, I accepted it, and Lucretia offered herself up as a candidate with permission from both of the relevant Sharou family members. If she does not become your concubine, then having failed at a marriage spearheaded by the king, she will almost certainly not be granted permission to marry any of the Sharou family.”

“Ah...” Zenjirou understood as Aura's dispassionate explanation concluded.

“Um, Sir Zenjirou? Did you really not think of that?” Freya asked hesitantly.

Zenjirou remained silent, his cheeks flushing with embarrassment as he merely nodded. Thinking about it calmly, it was a simple conclusion to reach. There were many reasons that his thoughts hadn't drifted in that direction, but the biggest was that he actually felt pleasantly disposed to Lucretia now. He felt

like he'd been frequenting the red-light district and gotten himself convinced one of the workers had real feelings for him. Having his *wife* point it out just made it hurt all the more.

Perhaps seeing his struggle as he sat silently on the sofa, Freya decided not to touch on the issue any further and moved the discussion along. "Then in that case, should we assume that Lucretia becoming your concubine is just a matter of time?" she asked.

There was a pause.

"Aura?" Zenjirou asked with a pained look, directing the question to the queen for a final decision.

"Truthfully, things have progressed far enough that it would be an issue if you do not," she replied. "A close relationship with the Twin Kingdoms is one of the major precepts of our national strategy over the coming years. However, harmony in the inner palace is even more important. In that respect, it depends more upon you."

"Ah, Your Majesty? That is rather unilateral," Freya ventured.

The way Aura had phrased it was essentially an order or a threat. Adding the claim that it was up to him right at the end just made it in even poorer taste. Freya had worded things as neutrally as possible in her mild rebuke to the queen.

"I suppose it is," Aura admitted.

Zenjirou, though, accepted it. "Thank you, Freya, but leave it there for this conversation. The whole point of this is to make our own feelings, hopes, and desires as clear as possible, then take each other's statements to reconcile and decide how to proceed from there. In that vein, I'll be frank. I've gotten at least somewhat closer to Lucy and wouldn't *hate* having her as a concubine. Still, I want to avoid it just as much as I did before. Of course, I'll accept it if not doing so would cause too much of an issue for the country or the royal family as a whole."

Zenjirou saw Lucretia as a female friend whom he'd originally struggled to interact with, but now somewhat enjoyed spending time with. The issue was

that what she'd said she saw their marriage as being was a great weight on him.

"A weight?" Aura asked after he explained that. "What do you mean?"

"Can you explain in some more detail, Sir Zenjirou?"

Zenjirou fell silent as he considered how to articulate what he meant, then started with a somewhat meandering explanation.

"Uh, how do I put it? She's got no plans for the marriage itself. Unlike the two of you. She also said that anything after she married would be up to whoever she married. You can see how that feels like having to take responsibility for her whole life after that, right? Having that responsibility would have to weigh heavily on you."

"Hm?"

"Um..."

Zenjirou had thought it was a relatively concrete explanation, but neither of the two women seemed to understand. They understood the actual words he'd said, but not the nuance behind them.

"Sir Zenjirou, I assume you do not mean that her claims are too good to be true and you can't believe them?" Freya asked. The conversation meant that she was fairly sure that was not the case, but she truly couldn't understand why that would make him want to avoid the duty.

"Yeah, that's not what I meant at all. Her saying that it'd *all* be up to me is probably an exaggeration, but it still feels like it's just dumping everything on me. It makes it sound like building a life after the actual marriage and figuring out what works would all be on me, which sounds exhausting."

"I would say... Actually, let me think for a moment." Aura offered her own surrender of trying to follow along as is. Indeed, she closed her eyes and began to think.

The disparity in their understanding was due to their fundamental viewpoints being dramatically different. Zenjirou thought that doing his utmost to make sure his partner was happy was an inherent part of marriage. Actually, it wasn't even that he *thought* it. That was just what marriage meant to him on a basic

level.

However, that way of thinking was completely alien to the royalty and nobility of this world. It made sense when you thought about it. The norm in this world was for a man to have multiple wives. Extensive mutual support between husband and wife only worked when there was one of each. A single man “supporting” several wives would inevitably lead to the man being crushed under the figurative weight of all those women. The only people who would be able to cope were the superhumans who were far removed from normal people in both mental fortitude and ability.

Unfortunately, Zenjirou was a normal human, not a superhuman in any way, shape, or form. Indeed, the majority of men from royal and noble families were not superhuman. How were they able to maintain those polygamous marriages despite that? The reason was simple: most men who married multiple women didn’t feel as responsible for the women they married as Zenjirou did. Those men would appreciate Lucretia’s lack of demands and willingness to defer to their preferences. However, they would take it literally, rather than reading into it.

“I suppose it could be how I often feel about you?” Aura suggested after a long period of thought. “You do not ask for anything, so dealing with you can be an issue.” She sounded far from certain of her conclusion, though.

It was Zenjirou’s turn to fall into thought now. “Well...it might be similar, yeah. Actually, thinking about it like that makes me realize I’ve put quite a burden on you. Sorry.”

Looking back on his behavior prompted the apology to come instinctively. Every time Aura had asked if he wanted something, Zenjirou had answered in the negative, but reversing their positions, he could see how much of an issue it could be for her. Aura wanted him to suggest *something*, no matter what it was.

However, there was a big difference between that and the relationship between Zenjirou and Lucretia. The reason Zenjirou hadn’t been able to really say anything however many times Aura asked was because he was satisfied with the marriage as it stood. It was all due to the current state of things.

Meanwhile, a marriage with Lucretia would be in the future. It hadn’t started

yet, so there was no way she would be satisfied with it “as it stood.” Having no signs for how she wanted it to develop was always going to make him worry.

Regardless, the conflict of viewpoints was caused by a mismatch of values, so fixing the discrepancy was all but impossible.

“Her Majesty wants to have Lucretia as your concubine from a strategic perspective, and you want to avoid it but will accept it if the cost of not doing so is too great. If we were to combine everything you have both said, could we sum it up as you not being enthusiastic about the prospect, but that you’re indeed willing to marry her?” Freya asked, bluntly summarizing everything that had been said thus far.

“Yeah, I guess,” Zenjirou replied, unable to hide an awkward smile. “Overall I’ve got a much better impression of her now than I did at first.”

If there was as much independence in this case as with Aura and Freya, he may have been surprisingly willing to accept it. Freya rested a hand on her chin as she considered things.

“Freya?” Zenjirou asked, prompting her to look up. However, she didn’t look up at him, but at Aura who was sitting at her side.

“Your Majesty, does Lucretia’s wedding need to happen urgently?”

Aura was slightly taken aback by the sudden question but answered regardless. “Well, the sooner it happens the better. It is not something we are hiding from you, but Capua and the Twin Kingdoms are attempting to form an alliance against the Northern Continent as a whole. Lucretia becoming Zenjirou’s concubine will strengthen that. Additionally, such an alliance takes time, and solidifying it after it is formed takes even longer. Taking that period into account means that the marriage happening sooner would be for the best.”

“I understand, but I am asking if there is any possibility for a postponement at all. I believe that Sir Zenjirou’s concerns can be solved in no small part with some time.”

There was a thread of logic to her statement. The relationship between Zenjirou and Lucretia had been far worse at first than it was now. Lucretia had been trying in vain to get closer to him and he had clearly not been able to deal

with it properly. They were closer now, though, and could spend time together and at least somewhat enjoy it. That was due to effort on both of their parts, but it also showed that time could fix the issues in the relationship between the two of them.

“That seems logical, but surely it could also happen after the marriage?” Aura asked, playing devil’s advocate despite understanding the thrust of the suggestion.

Zenjirou was the one to respond to her question. “That’d be pretty different. I’d try and meet her halfway after the marriage as well, but it’d force us closer to begin with. Having the marriage happen *after* those uncertainties are dealt with would be a big thing.”

His statement was not solely based on wanting to postpone what he didn’t want to happen for as long as possible. He wouldn’t deny that was part of it, but marrying would mean that they *had* to live with each other in some respects. He already spent his nights switching between Aura and Freya, but marrying Lucretia would add a third member to that rotation. Forcing the physical side of things before they were emotionally closer made things far more likely to end in conflict.

The queen nodded several times in understanding before offering her own misgivings. “That is certainly valid. However, I want some sort of reason to give the Twin Kingdoms as to why we are hastening our alliance while delaying the marriage.”

“Could I not be the reason?” Freya suggested. “If doing so personally would cause more issues, then my father or older brother...well, perhaps not. Could my *younger* brother show dissatisfaction with the prospect to get the Twin Kingdoms’s agreement?”

“That would be viable. It would cause less dissent to have it based on your relatives’ feelings rather than your own,” Aura agreed.

It made perfect sense that rushing into taking a second concubine after barely marrying the first would make that first concubine unhappy. However, if Freya herself demonstrated that, it would disrupt the inner palace in the future and lead to small but repeated murmurings of disagreements between Freya and

Lucretia. Additionally, if Freya herself didn't have some public impetus to "forgive" her, then she would need to keep up a facade of dissatisfaction with Lucretia.

Instead, having her father—King Gustav—or her younger brother, Yngvi, voicing their dissatisfaction from Uppasala would have the correct diplomatic effect without obstructing things in the inner palace as much.

"The problem then, though, is that there would need to be diplomatic ties between Uppasala and the Twin Kingdoms," Freya commented.

They needed to show a public position of opposition to Lucretia while privately making sure those involved knew it was just that, their *public* position. For that to happen, there needed to be a firm connection between Uppasala and the Twin Kingdoms.

The mention of diplomatic ties between those two countries made both Zenjirou and Aura fall silent.

"Sir Zenjirou? Your Majesty?" she asked, noticing the unnatural quiet.

The queen cleared her throat. "Indeed. There are things you must know if there are going to be official relations between Uppasala and the Twin Kingdoms."

"Aura?" Zenjirou spoke up, his eyes asking her if she was really going to say it.

"There is little point in hiding it now. I know it is likely too much to ask, but I want you to listen as calmly as possible. The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle are descendants of the White Empire."

"Pardon?" Freya asked rather flatly, not seeming to fully take in the sudden declaration.

Aura and Zenjirou then explained everything they knew about the relationship between the Twin Kingdoms and the White Empire. Zenjirou only knew what they had heard from Lucretia, but Aura had additional information from her private meeting with the former king, Bruno.

Once they had finished, Freya didn't seem to quite believe what she had heard and shook her head several times as if to clear it. "I do not think either of

you would lie in a situation like this, but that is honestly hard to believe. If it is true, then it is serious. Very serious.” Her face was even paler than usual.

The White Empire was seen as a sworn enemy by the biggest country in the west of the Northern Continent, Złota Wolność, and spoken of as a tyrannical nation that had once ruled over the continent through the church. As far as Freya was aware, it was all just legend and myth, and she had never met someone who truly believed it. Additionally, because of how they were spoken of on the Northern Continent, they would instinctively judge any descendants of the White Empire as enemies.

“Whatever the truth is, I will need to return and speak with my father. He will probably—no, definitely—be furious.”

There was a faint smile of grim resolve on her face as she spoke.

Freya had accepted the Lulled Sea as a gift from the Twin Kingdoms, and it had actually been an heirloom from the White Empire. If that was true and the church saw the magic tool, there would be no way of explaining it to them but Uppasala being allied with the remnants of the White Empire.

While she could say she hadn’t known, Freya had still gratefully accepted the Lulled Sea, so it would be hard to fully refute the charge of carelessness on her part.

“Generally, we would welcome a close relationship between Uppasala and the Twin Kingdoms. Of course, I cannot truly leave Capua, but I would appreciate it if you discussed this with King Gustav,” Aura told her.

“Things are a bit too extreme, so I don’t think they will see it as possible to make a decision based solely on secondhand information from me. I believe you should make sure you can discuss things in person with someone given full authority by the king. Either my father himself or my younger brother, I would assume.”

The first prince, Eric, was already part of a neighboring country, so Yngvi was being treated as the crown prince in all but name. In other words, as things stood now, he would be the next king.

Additionally, there was currently only a single simple method for the king or

prince of Uppasala—who resided in the far north of the Northern Continent—to communicate with those of the Twin Kingdoms—who lived in the very center of the Southern Continent. The one saving grace was that the conduit for that communication was one of the few people aware of the highly secret information.

Inevitably, that burden would fall on the person in question.

“Zenjirou.”

“Sir Zenjirou.”

The prince consort lifted his hands in surrender at the two women. “Right, got it. I’ll take on the diplomacy mission with Uppasala, so you can relax there. My other duties will suffer, though, so I could do with your support on that front.”

Teleportation was an extremely convenient spell, but it could be too convenient and cause problems for its caster. Since he had learned the spell, Zenjirou had become one of the busiest people in the country.

“Apologies.”

“I apologize for the extra burden.”

Zenjirou waved off his wives’ apologies. With the difficult political conversations over for now, Aura and Freya exchanged meaningful looks before standing in unison.

“Uh, Aura? Freya?”

While Zenjirou watched in confusion, the two women circled around the table and arrived on either side of him.

“Her Majesty told me that serious conversations are held facing each other here, but more relaxed conversations are next to each other, no? May I sit next to you?” Freya asked.

“Aura?” Zenjirou asked, turning the question to his other wife.

“Well, that is the state of things. Can I sit next to you?” she laughed.

It seemed the two of them had already discussed this, so Zenjirou refusing would just make things more complicated.

“Go ahead,” he said instead.

With his permission, they sat on either side of him. To his right was the curtain of red hair covering Aura’s head, while to his left was the shorter curtain of silver covering Freya’s. Neither of them pressed themselves right into him, but they sat quite close to him. Honestly, it was rather bad for his heart to have them both so close that he could feel the warmth coming from them.

When he was with Aura, sitting with her like this was when Zenjirou was at his happiest. He was also quite happy to sit at Freya’s side when he was with her. But having one of them on either side at the same time just seemed to be a weight on his shoulders.



Aura seemed to pick up on his feelings, since she shifted slightly along the sofa, opening up some space between them. Freya followed suit on his opposite side, keeping the same distance from him that Aura was. That let Zenjirou relax, at least.

Aura offered a small chuckle. “Apologies, I suppose we played too much with that. However, there will be more instances where we are sitting like this, so I hope you can get used to it.”

The inner palace was a place where all three of them could relax. If there were no future opportunities to sit like this, that would be bad in and of itself. Zenjirou had thought the seating arrangement had been intended specially for Aura and him to have one-on-one conversations.

“Uh, that’s going to carry on with the three of us? If there’s even one more then it’s going to end up physically impossible for everyone to sit next to me.”

“In that case, I suppose someone will just have to sit in your lap,” Freya suggested.

“Freya?!” Zenjirou yelped.

His silver-haired wife fell back onto the sofa in laughter. “It was a joke. That’s for when we’re alone.”

“Freya,” he repeated, in a lower tone this time.

“Right, sorry,” she apologized.

As Zenjirou let out a sigh, the two women exchanged looks of understanding with each other. The situation they were currently in was putting more pressure on him than they had first assumed.

“Still, we will be living in the same area. We *do* need to ensure that we continue the sharing of information and concerns,” Aura said, making sure Freya’s joke passed without bothering Zenjirou any further under the guise of getting the conversation back on track.

“You’re right there,” Zenjirou agreed, very much on board with what she was saying.

“Then let us discuss the current situation as frankly as we can,” Aura

continued. “The conversation will let us find the discrepancies in how we are seeing things.”

“Right, we found a lot of differences between the two of us in our day-to-day lives.”

“We did indeed. The differences between your and Freya’s values will come up while living together. After all, you will spend every other day in each other’s company. The issue is the differences between myself and her. I would like to discuss those.”

“I see. Then may I ask a somewhat rude question?” Freya interjected.

Zenjirou and Aura straightened in their seats at that.

“What is it?” Aura prompted her.

“What?” Zenjirou asked at the same time.

“Could you tell me about all of the strange items in this room?” As she spoke, Freya cast her gaze around the room, indicating several of the appliances.

“Ah, of course,” Aura responded.

“We should explain,” Zenjirou followed up after exchanging looks with the queen.

The two of them managed to explain the appliances after that. Of course, understanding it based on a verbal explanation was impossible, but Freya was able to understand that they were from Zenjirou’s homeland and that said homeland was far enough away that space-time magic was required to get there, and therefore the culture was completely different to both the Northern and Southern Continents.

“I see. I certainly can’t sense any mana from them. I’m rather surprised this isn’t a magic tool,” she said, crouching in front of one of the appliances as she spoke earnestly.

“Freya, can you close the door instead of just pretending to be impressed so you can keep your face there?” Zenjirou asked, reluctantly amused.

Freya had her face right up against the inside of the freezer and looked like a dog getting its ears scratched. While it wouldn’t have any effect on the

electricity bill, leaving the door open had made the fan at its back grow noisy, and leaving it open for much longer would see things start to thaw.

“Come on, Freya,” he added.

“Would you move?” Aura followed up.

“No, just a little longerrrr,” she mewled as Aura pulled her back far enough for Zenjirou to close the door.

Aura tried to get the conversation back on track, but Freya was inching her way towards the fridge-freezer again even now.

“You don’t know when to give in,” Aura commented.

“Just a few more minutes.”

While she was acting and speaking jokingly, the strength she was putting into getting closer was definitely not a joke. Although she had managed to survive the climate so far, the chill from the freezer had apparently wiped away any resistance she’d had.

Aura was stronger and had more stamina, so she could pull her back, but the moment she let go, Freya would launch back towards the appliance, so it was pointless.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was Aura who ran out of patience first. She sighed.

“Fine, let us move our conversation elsewhere,” she said, looking towards the door into the bedroom.

“Are you sure?” asked Zenjirou after a beat, surprised.

Aura shrugged. “It makes little difference at this point. We have shown and explained all of the appliances in this room, so hiding one of them is rather pointless.”

“Ah, that wasn’t what I...” Zenjirou started, scratching his head awkwardly.

Aura had assumed he was asking if she was sure they should show the air conditioner in the bedroom to Freya, but he was really asking if they should have her in the bedroom at all. A bedroom was the most private area for a husband and wife. Inviting another woman with whom her husband had a

relationship into that room—even if the other woman was officially married to him as well—felt rather immoral to Zenjirou.

That aside, it went without question that the air-conditioned room was the best place to spend the blazing season. In fact, Zenjirou and Aura both ate in the bedroom during that time—if they were eating in the inner palace, of course—so there were a table and chairs in the room as well as a bed.

“I suppose it’s fine,” he decided after a few moments. “Come on, Freya. Don’t worry, it’s just as cool as sitting in front of the freezer.”

As he spoke, Zenjirou stood up and opened the door into the bedroom.

The air-conditioned room was like a whole other world. The wooden shutters were tightly closed to keep the cool air in, so the LED lamps were lighting the space. In this room, and this room alone, it was like the active season rather than the blazing season, along with it being nighttime rather than daytime.

It was the first time Freya had been in such a room, and she was taking deep breaths, almost as if trying to let the cold air sink into her core.

“Sir Zenjirou, I brought a chair,” a maid informed him.

“Ah, thanks. Put it over there,” he responded with a gesture.

Zenjirou and Aura already had chairs of their own, so an extra one meant they could all sit to talk. The chairs in the bedroom were typical of Capua: wicker chairs of wood. They were naturally much less comfortable than the sofas in the living room, but the room as a whole was several times more comfortable than anywhere else as far as Zenjirou was concerned.

Around ninety percent of the reason for that was the cooling from the air conditioning, but the rest was that he didn’t have to sit with both of them right at his side. While they were both his wives, Zenjirou didn’t have the nerve to find sitting between two women comfortable.

“Haaah...”

There was an expression of utter ecstasy on Freya’s face as she sat down. The annex she lived in had magic tools that dispensed a cooling mist, but there was no comparison to an air-conditioned room. Finally being able to sit in a place

that wasn't hot led to her practically drifting off in comfort. Not that Zenjirou couldn't understand that.

"I'll move here," she said eventually.

"That is hardly likely," Aura replied with an exasperated look.

The room was her and Zenjirou's bedroom. Normally, Freya wouldn't be welcome here in the first place. Despite that, the three of them would be able to relax as they talked in the cooler area.

"I enjoy mulled wine, but I hadn't thought I would get the chance to have any on the Southern Continent. I think it would work in this room, though."

It was like someone enjoying a hearty stew in the middle of summer because of the room itself being chilled with air conditioning. Or from the other side, like enjoying an ice cream in the depths of winter because you were bundled up warm.

Zenjirou couldn't fault her—and was in fact rather impressed—at someone so new to the concept immediately jumping to an "advanced" way of enjoying the extra cooling.

Meanwhile, having been born and raised on the Southern Continent, Aura couldn't see the appeal of purposefully heating up alcohol before drinking it.

"Hm, I personally prefer drinking chilled alcohol. The brandy Zenjirou gave me was wonderful."

"Well, it was a particularly expensive one," Zenjirou explained. "It cost about ten times as much as the whiskey I brought for myself."

"Brandy and whiskey? You have those in your homeland, Sir Zenjirou?"

The Northern Continent already had distillation for similar kinds of drinks. However, it hadn't even been a century since they had come up with them, so they were a relatively new type of drink. That meant there was still a lot of trial and error, so while some of the products were decent, many of them were rather unappetizing.

"Wine would be my choice," Freya decided. "I like mead too, but production levels are fairly low, so I only have it on special occasions."

“Right, the drink from the wedding. It was a rather strange one. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it almost felt like a trick when I drank it.”

His impressions were understandable. The mead Uppasala favored was a deep golden color and smelled of honey, but it wasn’t particularly sweet. It wasn’t a bad flavor, but the first sight and sniff of it had you expecting a sweet honey taste, so the sharpness on the tongue disconcerted him before he could enjoy the taste itself.

“Well, scent and appearance are a big part of drinks,” Aura commented. “Speaking of appearances, the drink you brought back with you looks particularly intriguing.”

Zenjirou knocked a fist into his palm in remembrance at Aura’s statement. “Oh yeah, the one with gold in it from Marquis Pomorskie. It definitely is sort of interesting. The herbal scent and the flavor make it a bit of an acquired taste, though.”

As far as Zenjirou was concerned, the gold-imbued alcohol was something he might occasionally fancy, but not something he’d drink on the regular.

“It’s really rare,” Freya added. “If you served it on the Northern Continent, it’d start the conversation all on its own.”

Zenjirou laughed. “King Gustav said as much,” he replied, remembering the king’s response to it while he was in Uppasala.

“That’s right, you spoke with my father alone. Did he...perhaps say anything about me?”

There was no woman who wouldn’t be curious about such a conversation between her husband and father. Zenjirou thought back on the meeting before shaking his head.

“Hm...well, he had a few things to say, but nothing I can repeat here.”

The private discussion between the two of them had taken place with the understanding that anything they spoke of was not to be repeated elsewhere. That was all he’d really meant, but the phrasing and timing were awful.

“Father made comments?!”

Her reaction was hardly a surprise. Said reaction also served to make Zenjirou realize just how meaningfully his remark had been taken, but it was too late now.

“Ah, no, I didn’t mean anything like that,” he said hurriedly. “We just agreed to keep what we talked about to ourselves. That’s really all it was, nothing major.” At this point, though, he was just digging himself deeper.

“It’s a misunderstanding. I was somewhat of a handful when I was younger, but I’m much better now!” Freya cried. There were a rather large number of things that she could see her father telling Zenjirou about her.

She had never exactly been the ideal princess, not for as long as she could remember. She was well aware of the number of hardships she’d put her parents through. She also didn’t regret her past, but accepting her husband being told about it was a completely different matter.

“Yeah, it’s fine, honestly.”

Indeed, nothing that Gustav had said during that meeting about her was particularly objectionable. The closest thing would have been him asking Zenjirou if he *really* wanted to marry Freya.

“Okay...”

While she had let it go, the look in her eyes said that the misunderstanding was definitely still in place. Zenjirou might not be the most observant of people, but even he could see that. Regardless, he knew continuing the topic was just going to cause more issues, so he purposefully changed course.

“Incidentally, you use the sauna quite a bit. I guess you prefer it to a warm bath?”

The subject change was as subtle as a brick, and Freya didn’t hide the unhappy look on her face even as she allowed it.

“I do. I don’t *dislike* baths, but I’m more used to using a sauna, and I prefer them, particularly given how hot it is at present. Cooling off completely in the water before warming up in the sauna is wonderful.”

At her suggestion, the water in the cold bath had been set up to constantly

flow, making it even cooler. Freya sometimes made use of it during the day when the mist tools weren't doing enough for her.

"This room is even better, though," she added, a blatantly pleading look on her face.

"Not happening," Aura replied curtly, utterly unmoved.

The queen saw Freya as someone she wanted to be on good terms with—both in a political and a familial sense—but not good enough to share a bedroom with. Her willingness to temporarily allow Freya access when she was flagging particularly hard in the heat was extremely open-minded, considering they had married the same man.

"A shame," Freya replied with a shrug.

A conversation involving only the three of them—husband, legitimate wife, and concubine—alone was normally unheard of. Aura and Freya were both logical enough in general to make it possible, but if they weren't careful, it could cause problems in the future. Zenjirou was constantly warning himself about that, which made it seem like he was being rather too serious about these things from the women's perspectives.

"I don't dislike the sauna, but I'd have to say the normal baths are the best. That was the thing I missed most after my own bed while we were on the ship," Zenjirou admitted.

"That voyage was blessed. The purification tool and static flame meant that we could clean off fairly regularly. I can agree about the bed, though. I couldn't believe it."

Even Freya, who had traveled by sea before, had found the sleeping situation a hardship. Talking about the ship made Zenjirou remember one of his thoughts on the trip.

"What about a hammock, then? You use rope and fabric like this to make a bed," he said, gesturing as he spoke. "They used them in my world to sleep at sea in the past."

Every time he'd bashed his head on the cots, Zenjirou had thought that a hammock would be better. Once he'd arrived, though, his return trip being by

magic meant that he'd completely forgotten to suggest it. He was no exception to the saying "out of sight, out of mind."

On the other hand, it would certainly be something Freya would have to contend with in the future. Once her positions in the Capuan palaces were secure, she was eager to get back out to sea.

"I see...you have the fabric hanging from the ceiling to absorb the ship's swaying. It holds you in place as well while making it less likely you'll hit things like the cots. I have to admit the strength of the rope, fabric, and where they're fixed would be a concern."

It went without saying, but if a hammock that was in use broke, the person using it could get hurt. If it happened frequently, sticking with the cots would be much better.

"It sounds like a lot to consider," Aura commented, being unfamiliar with the specifics of sailing.

"Well, why not test it out once the *Glafir's Leaf* arrives in Valentia?"

The comment was just meant to just carry the conversation along, but he very much hadn't expected how Freya would respond.

"Well...I suppose that could work. Right," she said, almost pained.

"Is there a problem?" Zenjirou asked in concern.

It wasn't something she was going to hide, so she answered honestly. "The *Glafir's Leaf* is a ship of Uppasala. Now that I have married you, I am a Capuan."

"Ah, right."

It made sense now she told him. The four-masted ship belonged to the country, not to Freya personally.

"Their precious first princess got married," Aura remarked jokingly. "The least they could do is offer a ship and sailors for your newlywed life."

Aura knew how ridiculous the comment was, but Freya frowned as she responded.

"Don't be absurd. Unlike Capua, Uppasala is a poor nation. The *Glafir's Leaf* is

the only ship they have that can freely cross the continents.”

They technically had another, *Naglfar*, which also had four masts, but that was their flagship. It was a symbol of the crown, not something they could just send off into the waves. It went without saying how valuable the *Glasir's Leaf* was as they moved towards intercontinental trade with Capua.

“I get it,” Zenjirou said before pausing for a moment. “Wait, you said you wanted to head out to sea again, right? What are you doing for a ship and crew?”

It was a natural question, and Freya leaped at the chance.

“Exactly! So...” That was as far as she got before she turned completely to face Aura. “Give me a ship please?”

She was almost like a child begging for a snack.

“Hm? That mostly falls to you,” Aura replied. “We cannot make intercontinental ships. The majority of those with the skills to do so are currently *on* precisely that ship en route here. Half of the ships are being gifted to Uppasala to pay for those techniques, so perhaps you could borrow one of them.”

Freya didn't hide her annoyance with the feigned ignorance. “I just said, I'm already part of Capua. Fath— King Gustav will not hand over one of his precious ships, and I won't misdirect my requests like that.”

“Well, I will certainly admit you do not have a lack of direction,” Aura replied with a meaningful look at Zenjirou.

He was purposefully looking away—with a reluctant smile—as if to insist it had nothing to do with him. Aura purposefully didn't explain any further. Doing so would possibly counteract Freya's consideration.

Freya asking Aura for a ship—whether as a joke or as part of an actual negotiation—was no real problem, but involving Zenjirou would make things more complicated. If he was stuck between his wife and concubine, who were discussing things with the amount of money and influence involved in intercontinental trade, Zenjirou would need to disagree with one of them.

Once she knew Zenjirou wasn't going to comment, Aura continued slightly more seriously. "Well, I understand how much ships mean to you. Therefore, I am willing to give you one of the ships that will be made in Valentia."

"Really?!" Freya asked, almost jumping out of her seat, her hands on the table.

Aura's voice, though, was much calmer. "Really. However, all I can offer you is the ship itself. There are already prior agreements, so it will be the third ship at the earliest. Additionally, I want you to arrange the sailors yourself. Honestly, I would rather rely on you for personnel."

Uppasala was offering a number of people for training and general use, but that number was limited. There were not enough of them that Aura could offer any of them to Freya.

"Personnel? The only connections I have personally are the sailors from the *Glafir's Leaf*. However, they will know many others. They might be able to point me in the right direction."

She likely wouldn't be able to take on the people she knew personally, but they might be able to introduce her to others. It wasn't a bad suggestion, but there were some questions about it.

"Do you need to get the sailors themselves to introduce you? Couldn't we just ask King Gustav or someone from their navy instead?"

Aura responded before Freya. "That method would be a discussion between the two *countries*. If Princess Freya suggests it, it would be outside of that, no?"

Freya nodded. "Exactly. My goal isn't necessarily to get sailors from Uppasala. There are sailors from many countries that either have no citizenship, or have no real patriotism. In particular, I want to aim for skilled sailors who have lost their ships. I would most like someone who is on the level of a captain."

Her explanation was reasonable but somewhat lacking. Normally, in sea travel—particularly intercontinental sea travel—the ship was a sailor's life. If the ship sank, so did they. However, there were exceptions where the ship might sink but the sailors survived. If a ship was passing by the area where another sank, if the escape boats were able to reach land, or if the ship sank in port were all

situations where a sailor might survive.

However, surviving was not necessarily a blessing. The ship sinking meant the voyage was a failure, and also that they had lost all of their cargo. A captain who outright owned the ship and cargo would not be overly harmed, but such a situation was a rarity. In most cases, the ships were bought with a loan, or else the cargo was entrusted to them by some trading company. With the ship and cargo lying on the seabed, all that would be left was their debts.

“There must be at least a small number of captains or officers who have the skills and experience but have lost their ships and are in debt. Unfortunately, Uppasala has only just begun intercontinental trade, so as odd as it sounds to say it, they haven’t had anyone fail like that. We will need to look in other nations’ ports to find people. Those of Złota Wolność are promising.”

Sailors, particularly those who went on long trips between different countries were often not very aware of national borders. Some of them would be willing to work on another nation’s ships if they were asked. Many of them would probably get cold feet when they found out the Southern Continent was the destination, but she thought some of them would accept.

“Are you sure about this?” Zenjirou asked. “Some of them were probably just unlucky, but it sounds like others would just not have the skill.”

As far as he was concerned, there was no issue with the former, but he’d hesitate to recruit the latter, and that was why he’d asked. However, this was another point where their perspectives differed fundamentally.

“Of course. An unskilled sailor can be trained, but I’d honestly rather avoid unlucky captains. Still, this isn’t the kind of situation where I can afford to be picky with.”

“Huh?”

Freya looked back in question at the sound of Zenjirou’s surprise, making one of her own when he didn’t seem to be on the same wavelength.

“Uh, the unlucky ones are worse? I’d have thought that since it wasn’t a failure of their skills, you’d prefer them.”

“Well, there’s no way to improve luck, so I’d have thought it would be better

to go for the less skilled, since they can theoretically improve.”

It was simply a matter of how much they trusted in “luck.” Zenjirou didn’t see how lucky someone was as being intrinsic to their character. Of course, he knew that there were people who had been exceptionally lucky or unlucky *in the end*, but it was just that—a symptom.

Meanwhile, Freya saw luck as something people either had or didn’t. There were people who were lucky and others who were unlucky, and that amount of luck could not be changed as easily as their abilities or knowledge.

Therefore Zenjirou had no concern about sailors whose ships had been lost due to bad luck because they weren’t responsible. Whether they’d been unlucky before, whether that would continue, was just as likely for them as it was anyone else. However, Freya *did* have those concerns because she saw it as an intrinsic part of who they were, which could not be improved.

The two of them knew they had different views and ways of thinking, but the way they reacted to it was different for both of them.

“Ah, I get it. I can see how you could think about it like that. Guess that’s just one of those differences we hadn’t thought about,” was Zenjirou’s simple response.

“Um, you’d ignore luck? I couldn’t really...” was Freya’s, showing some reluctance towards his thinking. Or rather, she considered it outright unthinkable rather than feeling reluctant about it.

Freya was a logical person, but she had also sailed in what was essentially the age of sailing. Superstitions would inevitably take hold, and that was no surprise. A wooden ship was very little in the face of the open ocean. Even the *Glasiir’s Leaf*, the pinnacle of the Northern Continent’s engineering, was not all that different. The seas were too strong, and there wasn’t much that a human could do against them. That made differences in luck more important to sailors than slight differences in skill.

Assuming that luck was intrinsic, Freya’s opinion was correct. She believed that luck itself did exist like that, so she couldn’t understand Zenjirou’s opinion in the slightest.

“Uh, well it’s not so much that I’m ignoring it as just considering it superstition,” he said. Getting her understanding on this would probably be difficult, so he just conceded. “Well, they’ll be your sailors, so I guess you should pick what makes the most sense to you.”

Regardless of his belief in luck, he knew how important superstitions were. It could influence the morale of sailors who believed in such things.

“Well, the problem is the budget...” Freya began, looking towards Aura. It was the right choice; for any member of the royal family, the purse strings really were in the hands of the family head— in this case, Aura.

The queen gave an exaggerated shrug before replying. “The Alcott duchy’s budget should fund it. You will need to consider whether to prioritize the development of the land or your ship,” she offered unconcernedly.

Freya couldn’t help but pout in response. “Come on; you could offer an extra allowance for it,” she pressed. “It will definitely help the country.”

Upon marrying Zenjirou, she had become Freya Alcott Capua, simultaneously part of the Capuan royal family and Duchess Alcott. Alcott was the name of a coastal area of Capua, and was the territory she had been granted after becoming Zenjirou’s concubine. At present, it was an unoccupied region of coast, but it had the potential to be a good port. Capua—by way of its queen, Aura—had allowed its development, assigning both funds and personnel to it.

Freya wanted to make Alcott into the national port. Incidentally, although Aura was an investor, *she* wanted to make the already established Valentia the national port and have Alcott effectively be a huge shipyard instead.

Aura was both queen of the country and the Duchess of Valentia, while Freya was both a former princess of Uppasala and the Duchess of Alcott, so while both of them benefiting was certainly possible, it was also inevitable that they would clash on occasion.

While this was just a joking argument here, an official agreement between the two of them could alter the national budget by several percentage points, so an onlooker would see it as an intense discussion.

“My apologies, but our own budget is limited as well. We need to save where

we can.”

“That’s untrue; even your personal funds are probably a few *years* of Uppasala’s budget. Between the three of us, Alcott’s yearly budget alone is far more than the Uppasalan Navy’s.”

Freya had had an intuitive sense of it before, but now that she was Zenjirou’s concubine, she got to see the numbers and knew the truth of the matter. Of course, Aura *was* perpetually worried about the budget. As far as Freya was concerned, though, that was a luxury, if anything.

“Yeah, guess that’s the difference in country size,” Zenjirou remarked to himself as he watched Freya bemoan it.

It didn’t seem all that strange to him. He didn’t know the details, but he remembered that even on Earth, the richest people in the world could have the same kinds of budgets as small and medium countries.

On top of that, the laws in Capua meant that the separation between the state, the royal family, and the monarch was vague at best, so it would make sense that the money Aura could personally spend would outstrip a smaller nation’s budget.

Despite that understanding, he cocked his head in thought. “That said, I thought Capua’s budget wasn’t in the best state right now?”

He had seen at least some of the economic reports. Using them, he could see that the damage of the war had yet to be repaired. The lack of adult men the period of strife had caused was not easy to fix.

Aura admitted it as well. “That is true. Naval exports and our mines are producing much the same as before the war, and even land-based exports are getting better, but we still have a labor shortage in farming, and rebuilding the population is not simple.”

That was why she was ensuring that orphans were as protected as possible and gave preferential treatment to families who had lost the man of the house. As long as there were enough children, the workforce should recover within five to ten years. That was in the near future, though, not the present. If anything, the money going into that policy was itself a burden on the treasury.

“Oh, I see. Recovery is still ongoing,” Freya commented somewhat flatly. “I am glad for you.”

She had most definitely had enough of the topic, seeing just how vast the gulf between their two countries was. There was no getting around it, though. Capua was—in terms of land, population, and output—completely beyond Uppasala. To put it more directly, Capua had been blessed with the land and water needed for vast amounts of food and had grown in accordance with that, while Uppasala had eked out its survival in more barren, harsher regions and had therefore quickly plateaued in terms of population.

“Freya, if King Gustav’s plans for direct trade go well, Uppasala will become richer as well,” Zenjirou consoled her.

However, Aura added a comment of her own. “That will mean that things are going well here too, so the gap between us will not close.”

Freya made a noise and gave a look rather like a puppy that had just had its toy taken away. Aura patted her on the back with a rueful smile.

“I understand how you feel, and I will not insist you change your thoughts immediately, but you are not a princess of Uppasala any longer. You are part of the Capuan royal family, so do not focus solely on improving things for Uppasala.”

“Ah, right. My apologies,” Freya answered immediately. It was a difficult situation, though. Even in the modern day, if you changed citizenship via marriage, many people would still support their original country in the Olympics or the World Cup rather than their current home.

Although the degree was different, it could be similar to changing between prefectures. Assuming you lived in a rural area until after high school before going off to Tokyo for university and settling down to have kids, you were probably more likely to support your hometown than Tokyo in high school baseball games. For the common folk, you could just write it off as “how people were,” but when you were a royal controlling national government and spending, it was not so easy to dismiss. At the least, any decisions had to be “somewhat partial” to Uppasala at most.

“As harsh as it may sound, I would like you not to disclose those feelings even

to those close to you,” Aura said.

Though her words were somewhat harsh, they were not false. It went without saying that the people closest to Freya right now were the maids she had brought with her from Uppasala. If she continued to behave as an Uppasalan princess in conversation with people from the same country, only they would end up united, and in a bad way.

Freya was aware of this as well. “Ah, of course. But with just the two of you, surely it’s fine? I’d like to let things out a little on occasions like this.”

The statement was proof of her trust in them, and Aura’s mouth quirked up into a smile at that.

“If no one but Zenjirou, Lady Skaji, or I are with you, then do as you wish.” Aura nodded. It was better for her and Zenjirou to know how Freya felt, and Skaji was too close to the princess. If she couldn’t express herself freely at least around Skaji then it would start to wear on her mentally.

“Thank you.”

Zenjirou felt rather overwhelmed seeing the two royals discussing the limitations of what one could say even in private.

“International marriage for royals sure is something,” he commented. “I thought it was much less serious.”

Freya laughed at his impressed statement. “For countries like Uppasala with no lineal magic, these marriages are common. There are even some countries that *have* lineal magic—like the Kingdom of Graz—that practice such marriages regardless.”

Due to that, there was the odd caster who could use the Graz family’s lineal magic—expansion magic—across many different royal families.

“Because of that, female royals like us are brought up under the assumption that we will someday marry into another country. The men are usually kept within their own lands, though there are exceptions, like Eric.”

There was therefore some degree of tolerance when it came to becoming royalty of another country. There were good and bad sides to that. One benefit

was that their citizens were prepared for it and able to act as part of another country's royal family. One disadvantage, however, was that unless the educators in the country were particularly honest, there would be a rooted sense of belonging to Uppasala.

Zenjirou and Aura had both noticed that. While they trusted Freya's logic and honesty, they knew that they could not trust her wholeheartedly.

"Hm, that is rather different than the Southern Continent, where we do all we can to keep lineal magic within the nation. Can we assume that the palace in Uppasala is therefore somewhere that foreigners can easily integrate into?" Aura asked, a hand on her chin.

Freya purposefully frowned slightly before shaking her head. "Normally, that would be the case, but I would have to say that the answer is likely not in the sense that you are asking, unfortunately. While marriage into other royal families is common, it is within the same cultural sphere. For Uppasala, that would be the five animistic countries in the north—though Utgard is somewhat of an exception—and not really any other nations. Royal families with strong influence from the church are similar in that they only marry into other families with the same tendencies, although, as I mentioned, there are exceptions like the Kingdom of Graz, whose royals marry into all countries. Ofus is another kingdom that is part of the five nations in the north but where around twenty percent of its citizens are members of the church. Capua, being from the Southern Continent, has a different cultural sense than all of them, so I cannot say that it would be *easy* for someone to integrate. Was that what you wanted to ask?"

The queen gave the silver-haired princess a brief nod at her question. That was exactly what she had wished to ask. One of her major concerns was whether someone from Capua would be accepted if they married into the northern kingdom. With the answer being "no," the frequency of international marriages within the northern countries was essentially irrelevant.

"Oh, are you talking about Prince Yngvi?" Zenjirou asked, coming to an understanding.

The prince was Freya's twin brother and likely to be the next king. There were

also rumors that he was interested in taking a concubine from Capua.

Of course, those rumors had been purposefully spread by diplomats from Uppasala. The rumors themselves were meant to see how Capua would react. Naturally, they had reached both Aura and Zenjirou.

“Indeed. It is not an awful suggestion for the Capuan royal family. However, that relies on the safety of whoever we send.”

Her reddish-brown eyes were directed to Freya, questioning. The princess took a slight breath before answering.

“I imagine that it will certainly be difficult. Someone from the Southern Continent will stand out due to their skin color, their hair color, and even their eye color. Additionally, as you know, Sir Zenjirou, the Northern Continent has a tendency to look down on those from the Southern Continent,” she said plainly.

Zenjirou had visited both the commonwealth and Uppasala, so he had somewhat experienced that. Of course, in his case, he had been vouched for by a member of a Northern Continent’s royal family, so he was treated as such in general. Even so, there was a minority who had shown hints of disdain towards him. This disparagement was not on concrete grounds like Eric’s judgment of his aptitude. It was people seeing those from the Northern Continent as inherently superior to those from the Southern Continent.

“Yeah, there were a fair few people looking down their noses. I was officially considered royalty and only there for a while, but they were still there, so a girl from some noble family would probably see less of a welcome.”

Zenjirou was rather concerned about it with his fundamentally being a normal person from modern Earth. While he understood intellectually how important the politics were, he couldn’t ignore the emotional burden on either member of such a marriage.

Somewhat surprisingly to him, Aura felt the same way. But while Zenjirou’s resilience was due to his emotional reaction, Aura’s was due to knowing from experience that forcing a political marriage would do more harm than good.

“Hm, then we will have to be cautious. I have already heard some from Zenjirou, but I would like to hear your thoughts, Princess Freya. What kind of

person is Prince Yngvi?” Aura asked, before allowing silence to persist as Freya considered the matter.

Freya maintained the silence for a few moments after the question.

“Well, while this includes some of my familiar biases, I consider Yngvi someone you can trust. Though I will admit that he is somewhat strange for a member of a royal family.”

“‘Strange’ like yourself?” Aura asked.

“Not in the same way. But, well, to the same extent at least.”

“So simply trusting him without question is risky.”

“That’s rather rude!” Freya protested with a hurt look. However, Zenjirou didn’t entirely disagree and therefore kept silent.

Meanwhile, Aura dealt with Freya’s protest. “It is a fair assessment. It makes finalizing a decision rather difficult, though. If Prince Yngvi were as uninhibited as yourself, I would fear sending any concubine.”

If a noble married Yngvi, her most reliable ally would be the prince in question. If said prince was as flighty as Freya, it would increase the danger level for any concubine all the more.

However, Freya dismissed those concerns entirely. “Oh. That wouldn’t be an issue. That isn’t what makes him off. His interests lie in the direction of the kingdom itself. He desires to further the country such that it can lead the way. Therefore, while a concubine from Capua will strengthen the country, he will treat her in good faith.”

Aura tilted her head in question. What Freya was saying would be considered cold calculation for a common person, but still good faith for a royal.

“Hm? What is strange about that?” she asked. Aura was a royal born and raised, so nothing Freya had said sounded off to her. All she could imagine was a completely normal royal.

However, Freya’s brow furrowed slightly. “Well...it certainly *sounds* like that... How to put it? Yngvi...goes somewhat beyond the pale. The very act of wishing for a concubine from the Southern Continent would be utterly unthinkable by

the norms of royalty on the Northern Continent.”

“Hmm...” Aura mused. “In other words, he would be an ambitious soul who goes too far?” As she spoke, the visage of her own marshal floated up in her mind. If Yngvi was of a similar ilk, she would need to pick any concubine with *great* care.

“I don’t think I’d call it ambition. It’s simpler and childishly straightforward. That’s what makes it a problem.”

“Ah, I see. I can certainly agree that he sounds somewhat like you, albeit in a different way.”

“Must you be so rude?”

“It is a fair assessment.”

Zenjirou watched the surprisingly friendly conversation between his wife and concubine, a reluctant smile on his face.

“Still, we need to know more about the prince before this progresses any further,” he said, joining the conversation. “Maybe I should be spending more time there?”

He would be there one way or another already. Due to the information regarding the Twin Kingdoms and the White Empire, finishing up the trade agreements and gathering more information about the continent as a whole was important. He could use those occasions to actively seek Yngvi out and get some idea of the kind of person he was.

The queen considered the suggestion for a while before offering one of her own. “I would appreciate that. However, if I could, I would prefer to take his measure directly.”

“Then we could have him here for a while like Prince Eric. Of course, that relies on their permission.”

Freya clapped at that. “That would be good. Yngvi would jump at the chance. A husband or wife temporarily visiting their partner’s country is somewhat common for international marriages on the Northern Continent.”

It was a custom resulting from marriages among royalty and nobility across

borders being a relatively established practice in the North. Of course, that was *on* the continent. A royal—the next in line to the throne, no less—would normally only be so concerned about his first wife. For that reason, Yngvi visiting the Southern Continent even briefly for a concubine would normally be far from realistic. However, Yngvi was, according to Freya, odd enough that he would happily leave any common sense or norms behind to further his goals.

“Aura?” Zenjirou asked just in case.

She nodded. “Indeed. Move things towards having Prince Yngvi visit here once. We shall prepare for it if he accepts.”

“If you’re preparing, then make sure he has a mist generator in his first room. Uppasalans need a lifeline against the blazing season here,” Freya said quickly.

Aura gave another small nod. “I understand.”

Normally, a magic tool was not so easily arranged. They would need to provide Francesco or Bona with a marble, but they could not reveal that in front of Freya. While Freya might be part of Capua now, that didn’t mean they would—or could—reveal the latest developments in Capuan technology or a secret that the Twin Kingdoms had kept for decades.

“While I cannot guarantee it will be ready in time, I will attempt to make the arrangements.”

Even as she offered the proviso, Aura planned to have Yngvi spend at least a single night without the relief of the mist generator. The “winter” that Uppasala had was completely incomprehensibly harsh to someone from Capua. While they were complete opposites in specifics, assuming the blazing season was just as harsh for someone from Uppasala, having Yngvi experience it would go a long way towards future understanding.

Besides, unlike Freya and the ambassador, who would both be in Capua for years to come, they could simply wait to invite Yngvi until the active season if they wanted to avoid the problem.

Aura purposely avoided any such suggestion. Slightly unfair though it may be, she was perfectly willing to use some low-risk methods to increase their chances.

Chapter 5 — The Gray Cat's Invite

Several days later, wearing the third uniform, Zenjirou was in Freya's homeland. While it was the blazing season in Capua, it was currently summer in Uppasala. Although Zenjirou was only working based on his own estimates, he'd say that the temperature here felt like it was in the low to mid-twenties as opposed to the high thirties to low forties that were common in Capua. Additionally, while it was still summer, the season was nearly over.

On top of that, the capital was located on Lake Mater—a huge lake, bigger than Lake Biwako—which meant that if the wind was blowing in the right direction, it would be a cooling breeze that could make it feel almost *biting*, even in summer.

“If I'd come here first, I'd have brought a heater, not an air conditioner,” he said to himself as he sat in the annex of the palace, Valaskjálf, which they were loaning him. The building itself was now officially considered the Capuan embassy.

Such treatment had been quite shocking among the countries of the Northern Continent. The shock itself was hardly a surprise. Uppasala had diplomatic ties in one form or another with several other nations, and there were several embassies within the capital. Those embassies, though, were just buildings in the city, not within the palace itself.

The reason for this special treatment for Capua—which was, at best, a newcomer to the continent's diplomatic scene—was at least half due to their lineal magic. Or, more specifically, their teleportation powers.

Zenjirou was in a guest room of the embassy, ready to meet the guests of honor. He had sent a maid with an invitation several days earlier. The slight disadvantage of the spell was that although he could send a message saying when he was intending to visit, he could not receive any response. Pushing such meetings onto Uppasala without their agreement was somewhat rude, but the only option for any such communication between the two nations was his

teleportation, so there was no avoiding it.

The maid Zenjirou had sent was one of the maids Freya had brought with her from Uppasala. It was a welcome chance for a temporary homecoming for her. Of course, it went without saying that she'd had a collection of letters to family from her less-lucky compatriots as well as a list of souvenirs to buy in Uppasala pushed onto her.

Finally, the two guests Zenjirou had been waiting for arrived: King Gustav V and his son Prince Yngvi. Zenjirou had sent individual requests for an audience with each of them, but seeing them together was well within the realm of possibility, so he wasn't particularly taken aback.

Once the basic greetings had been exchanged and the two native royals were sitting, Zenjirou spoke.

"Welcome. You both have my thanks for responding to my request while you are so busy."

The king and prince both smiled at that. "Not at all," Gustav replied with a broad grin. "A son-in-law is still a son, so I am all too pleased to be able to see you."

"Indeed," Yngvi agreed. "Besides, I doubt my brother-in-law would ask to see us for no reason whatsoever. I wager this could be quite interesting." There was a gleam in his blue eyes, so similar to Freya's.

"I do hope it lives up to your expectations," Zenjirou said with a wry smile. He felt like the younger man was definitely overestimating him, although he was pretty sure that this would indeed live up to Yngvi's expectations. Zenjirou straightened in his chair before beginning to speak again. "Princess Freya's debut was completed without issue a few days ago."

"Oh my, really?" While Yngvi's question was joking, there was still a hint of skepticism in his gaze, matched by his father's. It seemed that both of her relatives had their doubts about how "without issue" it had really been.

"Indeed it did. Her Highness is certainly a thoughtful individual."

While Zenjirou meant what he said, the king and prince's doubts were evident on their faces.

“Freya is thoughtful?” Gustav asked, blatantly disbelieving.

Meanwhile, Yngvi’s face broke out into a smile as he clapped. “She really has found the ideal marriage. I’m sure if you looked across *both* continents for someone who would view a marriage starting as hers did, as well as what she did during the ceremony, and genuinely call her ‘thoughtful,’ you would be the only one they found.”

Yngvi was referring to Freya using her welcome to Capua to ask to accompany Zenjirou to a wedding—in other words, proposing—in front of Aura, along with taking a sword to cut the meat at her own wedding. Based on either continent’s norms, both of those actions were entirely divorced from the social norms.

“Well, while that is certainly true, Freya is intelligent and makes her wishes clear, so she is trustworthy.”

While the words were partially in defense of her, they were how Zenjirou actually felt. Freya was someone who based her words and actions on rational decision-making. Or if you were being less kind with your wording, she based them on her own benefits.

The entire reason she had practically proposed to Zenjirou at an official function was that if she had not, her desires would not be fulfilled. Therefore, if Freya knew that her desires could be achieved through things most would see as sensible, she would only use those sensible tactics. Freya Alcott Capua was not someone who created chaos for her own enjoyment. Of course, she was also not someone who feared such chaos.

Zenjirou had only meant to use talking about Freya as a lead-in, so they had gotten rather off-topic. “At said debut, she mentioned you, Prince Yngvi,” he said, dragging the conversation back on track despite knowing it was a rather blatant diversion.

Fortunately, neither of the Uppasalans took offense, allowing the shift.

“Oh, Freya mentioned me? I dread to think. I do hope she spoke fairly of me.”

“That would not be a concern. The young ladies were rather interested to hear that you were her twin and look similar to her.”

“Oh, well I am glad to hear it,” Yngvi said, leaning forward with a smile.

The smile was real, but even Zenjirou was able to see that the happiness was not just because of his popularity with the foreign ladies. Yngvi was well aware of what Zenjirou mentioning his popularity with the Capuan women meant here.

He responded to the eagerness in Yngvi's eyes. "I have a proposal. I imagine you are rather busy, but how would you feel about visiting Capua? It would be an honor to welcome you."

Rumors of Yngvi's desire for a Capuan concubine to strengthen ties between the two nations had purposefully been leaked within Capua. The response to those rumors was Zenjirou's question here: "There are young women in Capua who are interested in you, so we would like you to visit Capua" could be translated to "Capua will not refuse to send a concubine. However, we want you to visit our country first."

Joy welled up in Yngvi's gaze as he heard this favorable response, and there was excitement in his voice as he answered. "That sounds good. I would be happy to do so. That would be acceptable, right, father?" Even as he answered from his seat, he added a request for permission to his father almost as an afterthought.

Gustav didn't hide the reluctant amusement at how his son responded. "Well, considering the importance of the trade between us, it is certainly sensible for you to visit Capua at least once. However, you will need to ensure your duties do not suffer," he warned him.

"I understand, father. There you have it; I will gladly accept. The precise time frame will need to be decided at a later date. I apologize for the extra effort that this will burden you with."

The only practical method to traverse the distance between the two countries was Zenjirou's teleportation, so it would all rely on him.

"Not at all. However, I cannot stay here for too long, so we can discuss this in full at that later date."

"Of course. It is not immensely urgent, after all. Ahh, I'm looking forward to this. Although not as much as Freya, I am rather curious in general, so I am very interested in the Southern Continent. Eric found his time there to be very

worthwhile as well.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Zenjirou replied with a smile. “Prince Eric was more taken with the dash drakes than I expected. Would you like us to arrange one for you as well while you are there?”

“That sounds good; please do. If I could be even more selfish, I have to say that I am more interested in the dwarf wyverns. Would it be possible to see one as well?”

“The dwarf wyverns?” Zenjirou responded with a blink, somewhat taken aback.

“Indeed. From what I hear, they fulfill a similar role to our carrier pigeons. While they are only about as large as a crow, they are carnivorous and fly both farther and faster than pigeons. They are very intriguing.”

The sparkle in his eyes had grown to a full-on gleam, so Zenjirou warned him ahead of time. “We can allow you to look and interact with them, but we cannot allow you to bring one back to the Northern Continent.”

“You cannot?”

“No. We cannot.”

However disappointed the prince was, that answer wasn’t going to change. The wyverns were drakes, so they likely wouldn’t cope with the different climate of the Northern Continent, but Zenjirou made the refusal clear just in case.

Unlike the other drakes in common use, the dwarf wyverns flew through the sky. While they were used like carrier pigeons to send letters, there were periodic occurrences where a wyvern did not make it back. The best case scenario was that they had been preyed upon by some other carnivore or died in an accident; the worst case was that they had made their home elsewhere and become feral again. Zenjirou wanted to avoid pointless ecological damage to the Northern Continent, if possible.

Regardless, it seemed that they could take Yngvi’s visit to Capua as all but certain. In other words, it was now much more likely that someone from Capua’s high nobility would become his concubine.

Zenjirou's own statements had altered the course of someone's life drastically. He had experienced the same thing with Freya, but unlike with her, he could hold no further responsibility over their life. He swore to himself to try and make sure the couple understood each other as much as possible to avoid an unhappy marriage. Part of that was for his own emotional health, of course.

That brought his business with Yngvi to an end, and now he had to deal with Gustav. The information he had to share with the king was not something that could be widely spread. Much of it had to do with the connection between the White Empire and the Twin Kingdoms, Utgard, and so on. However, Yngvi was practically the crown prince. Zenjirou would have to delegate the decision of whether to include Yngvi to the two royals.

"I have things to discuss with you, King Gustav, but I would like them to remain as private as possible," he said, his eyes moving to Yngvi.

The silver-haired prince just smiled in response, his eyes essentially saying, "I'm not going anywhere."

Gustav sighed at his son's behavior before replying. "He will be the next king of Uppasala. If there is something I should know, then it is likely he should as well," he said.

He didn't entirely sound like he meant it. Indeed, there was a very real sense of unease to his decision.

Gustav saw the young prince as talented enough to be the next king. He was motivated enough as well. The problem was that he was perhaps *too* motivated, and Gustav saw that extra motivation as a risk.

"The topics include the White Empire, the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, and Utgard. Is that acceptable?"

Yngvi's reaction was extreme. His smile had grown even wider, and at the same time, he tightened his grip on the armrests of the chair. It was a blatant declaration that he was not going to move an inch from his seat. It was the very image of a spoiled child insisting on getting his way.

"I would like to hear what you have to say," Gustav responded with a resigned expression after looking pained at his son's reaction.

Once Zenjirou had relayed everything he had to say, the king and prince remained silent for a long time. While Gustav naturally had a severe look on his face, so did Yngvi. That was not entirely surprising, though. The subject was rather extreme, and just as daunting if it proved true. Additionally, even if it was not true, there were enough people who would believe it that the impact would be massive.

The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle had originated from the White Empire. However, the exact cause of shock for the two natives was different.

“I had my suspicions based on what I had heard from Freya, but to think the people of the Twin Kingdoms are truly descendants of the White Empire...” he said, shaking his head slightly.

Yngvi turned to his father in surprise. “You believe it, father? Ah, my apologies, Zenjirou. I am not doubting you.”

None of the prince’s usual relaxed demeanor was present, and Zenjirou waved him off.

“Do not worry; your reaction would be the norm,” he said, simultaneously implying that Gustav’s was *not* and waiting for his response.

Gustav accepted his son-in-law’s look without complaint and spoke openly. “Indeed. By the norms of our world, it would be unbelievable. My belief in your words is based on a solid foundation. A foundation passed down only verbally through the line of succession in Uppasala.”

Zenjirou made a slight noise of surprise at the same time as Yngvi let out a quiet cheer. The situation was extremely unique, and precisely because of its uniqueness, Gustav’s decision was not wrong. However, forging ahead with information that was *only* passed down from king to king meant that he saw Yngvi as the next king in all but name.

He cleared his throat before continuing. “The details are rather divorced from the main thrust of the topic, so I shall summarize. The ancestors of our royal family once had contact with remnants of the White Empire. There are tales that we both assisted them and were assisted by them in turn.”

“I see.”

That information being passed down through the royal family would indeed ensure that they did not see the White Empire as mere legend like much of the world. Of course, that did rely on you taking the royal family's word as the truth rather than the generally agreed-upon history. There might even be actual evidence that supported the existence of the White Empire rather than just verbal information.

Despite Zenjirou's thoughts on that, it was baseless conjecture, and even if it was correct, Gustav wouldn't be likely to tell him. Instead, he just took the good luck of Gustav believing him about the Twin Kingdoms for what it was.

Zenjirou then continued. "Given your understanding, I have more to say. The Twin Kingdoms are descendants of the White Empire and are also in an alliance with Capua. Therefore, we are somewhat resigned to the fact that this will cause discord with the church. However, we would like to hear your thoughts."

"Hmm..." Gustav closed his eyes at that, straightening, then eventually replied. "So, there are royal families descended from the White Empire on the Southern Continent. If that is true, even if it is only a self-proclaimed fact, the church will probably see value in that information. I cannot say how they would react, but it is entirely possible they could move to eliminate the remnants of the empire or 'liberate' the Southern Continent. We should bear that in mind, even if it may be a needless concern."

"Liberating" the Southern Continent would essentially mean invading it. Naturally, Zenjirou's expression tightened. However, he had somewhat expected this, so he was able to stay relatively calm.

"Which means they would not *definitely* do so?" Judging from the king's attitude, he didn't see it as likely.

Gustav nodded. "Indeed. Naturally, we cannot let our guard down, but I think the probability is low. Fortunately for the Southern Continent—less so for us—things are not so calm, even in the west. The church itself is no exception."

The king's analysis was that there was little chance the church would immediately set about invading the Southern Continent. His logic was sound. Of course, any decision would be made by people—an organization, at that—so there was no guarantee they would make the correct choice. If the extremists

who saw the church's doctrine as absolute took the initiative, it was possible they could kick off a large-scale attack on the Southern Continent. Conversely, if the more self-interested faction took the lead and saw the Southern Continent's nations as an easy target for colonization, there was still the chance they would move on the South.

You couldn't tell the future. It was the unenviable responsibility of a statesman to take what understanding they could get and draw up plans for that future, though.

"Ah, we may just call them 'the church' as a whole, but there are several factions. I recall hearing about the fang and claw, at least," Zenjirou said, remembering the explanation from the priest Yan.

"Indeed. However, the opposition between those two is historical, so they have a good grasp of each other. Squabbles aside, it is hard for anything to go too far between those two factions. The discord within the church at present is due to internal power struggles among both the fang and claw. Additionally, there are those who wish to step outside of their ancient categories and reconsider their teachings. That reminds me, you met Priest Yan in the commonwealth. He is one of the foremost proponents of that reconsideration."

Zenjirou couldn't hide his surprise at hearing the name he was just thinking of. "He is?"

In Zenjirou's estimation, the priest was intellectual and kind, the very image of a holy man. However, when he considered his interactions in the commonwealth, he remembered Yan being described as "simultaneously like a mountain and a storm." Zenjirou had only interacted with him for a few days, so it was easy to accept that he had only seen a single facet of the man.

"More difficult will be their interactions with us. Compared to the Southern Continent, we are practically neighbors of the church," Yngvi muttered, a serious expression on his face.

Zenjirou stiffened at that. The church's influence was vast on the Northern Continent. Uppasala could certainly distance themselves from Capua to avoid their ire. However, his concerns were soon alleviated.

"It will be a challenging course to chart indeed," Gustav said. "It is something

that will concern us deeply. While keeping the connection between the Twin Kingdoms and the White Empire a secret forever is likely impossible, we should delay it as much as possible, and I would like your cooperation with that.”

The king’s words had been initially directed to Yngvi, but he turned to Zenjirou to finish. The statement itself implied that Capua and Uppasala would remain as close as they were. Zenjirou’s relief and questions must have shown on his face, as Gustav laughed heartily before adding to what he had said.

“The marriage between the two of you took place in the palace in front of representatives from other countries of the continent. Our connection will remain firm.”

While he had put it somewhat bombastically, he was not wrong. Uppasala had openly held a wedding with Capua on the international stage. Changing their course at this point would be far from easy. Of course, it could require losing their first princess and would be quite an injury to them. Zenjirou understood that as long as nothing extreme happened, their policies would not change. The tension eased from his shoulders.

“I will, of course, do my utmost to ensure that relations remain good between our nations,” he said.

“I am glad to hear it. Such a statement from you assures me that our country’s relationship will continue.”

In fact, if the connection between the two nations was to be brought down to a single person, Freya’s husband, Zenjirou, would be the most important piece. He knew that he should keep the conversation going with the assumption that their alliance would not break down, so he managed a smile and spoke.

“Fortunately, while we have strong ties with you, we also have an alliance with the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. We shall make arrangements to mediate between the two of you.”

The king didn’t bargain at all, simply offering an agreement. “We appreciate it and would be glad to accept.”

Now that they knew the Twin Kingdoms were descendants of the White Empire, they had to meet directly. At present, only Zenjirou could provide the

opportunity for the two countries to directly interact. There was no room for negotiation there.

“Very well. I shall discuss it with the Twin Kingdoms. I assume that I will be sending one of them with authority to our embassy here. Is that acceptable?”

“I can accept that. However, please inform them that someone who must return to Capua to make every decision would be problematic.”

In other words, the king was asking the Twin Kingdoms to send someone with the right to decide on national policy. That would inevitably mean someone from their royal families, a member of the direct line, who was part of politics. Since it was international, it would presumably need to be someone from the Gilbelle family rather than the Sharous.

Once he had considered it, Zenjirou decided that those decisions would fall to the Twin Kingdoms and dropped the line of thought.

“Very well. I shall inform them.”

“My thanks. Ah, could you pass on thanks to them for the Lulled Sea as well? It is a wonderful tool. Might you also inform them that we would not dream of handing it off and that it has determined our diplomatic course?”

“I shall ensure they are aware,” Zenjirou replied, unable to contain a pained smile.

The words themselves were fine when taken literally; however, the emotions behind them were blatantly not gratitude, but protest. The Twin Kingdoms giving Freya the Lulled Sea had practically been a pitfall. They had kept their relationship with the White Empire a secret while having Uppasala accept an heirloom from it.

Considering how the commonwealth saw the White Empire and the church’s view of them as enemies of the dragons, it was easy to imagine them deciding to treat Uppasala the same way. To avoid that, they would need to return the Lulled Sea at the very least and break ties with the Twin Kingdoms. However, that would almost certainly invite a mutiny from the sailors who had been so greatly aided by the magic tool.

The Lulled Sea forcefully limited the movement of water and air within its

area of effect. Even in the middle of a tempest, a ship would act like it was on calm seas. It also didn't interfere with eating, drinking, or breathing, so it was extremely convenient.

Latest in ship technology or not, the *Glafir's Leaf* was still just a wooden ship. Spending over a hundred days at sea made it completely obvious just how valuable the Lulled Sea was. Trying to take it away because of a political issue would—if the worst came to pass—lead to the sailors fully rebelling.

As soon as the Twin Kingdoms had given the trap gift of the Lulled Sea and the sailors had experienced its benefits, Uppasala's diplomatic course was mostly fixed. Having a close relationship with the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle—wielders of both enchanting and healing magic—was not a bad thing, but that didn't change the fact that it had been founded on a trick. They would need some form of recompense to make the relationship more equal and to keep it friendly.

While Zenjirou didn't know the specifics of Gustav's thoughts, he also couldn't involve himself more in matters between the two countries.

The king continued, "Regardless, both our trade and interactions with the church cannot be solely decided by us and Capua. However, I would like it remembered that we are the combined linchpin."

"We are well aware that Uppasala is our link to the Northern Continent," Zenjirou assured him.

The man seemed satisfied with that and gave a deep nod. Trade aside, if conflict with the church came to light, the situation would be bad if only Capua, Uppasala, and the Twin Kingdoms were involved. Uppasala particularly would be in a bad position with their status as the only one of the countries actually on the Northern Continent.

At the very least, they could do with getting the other animistic countries—the Kingdom of Ofus, the Kingdom of Tuurukku, the Kingdom of Berggen, and Utgard—as allies. Ideally, they would also have an alliance with the Kingdom of Graz, who were willing to engage in political marriages with the other five countries, along with the Red and White Dragon Kingdoms, who were a step removed from both denominations of the church.

While those countries could be added to both the alliance and trade agreement, Uppasala and Capua should remain at its core. As Zenjirou demonstrated his agreement with Gustav's implication, he avoided offering a firm promise.

"That reminds me," the king said purposefully. "I seem to recall the representative of Ofus causing a stir at your wedding. Could I ask you to share what you discussed afterwards?"

The older warrior, Kevin from Ofus, had caused quite the stir during the wedding, with both Gustav and Yngvi witnessing it. Of course, they would investigate it, looking to find what kind of person Kevin was and what had caused the disturbance.

Kevin had once served the first prince of Ofus. He had been aboard the same ship that had claimed the prince's and princess's lives. He was one of the few who had made it back from the fateful voyage, and was the one who had retrieved the first prince's corpse. He believed in the survival of the prince's daughter—Margarette—whose corpse had not surfaced, and still searched for her to this day.

None of that was particularly secret, so it was rather easily discovered with some investigation. Of course, the two royals present had explained that.

"Is the maid Margarette truly the princess?" Yngvi asked in interest from the side. "That would make her Eric's cousin, no? She had rather similar hair and eye colors to him, though I couldn't say whether her looks as a whole were close to his or not."

The expression on his face was not just one of curiosity. Instead, it was one of calculation. He was wondering whether the veracity of this rumor could be used to the country's advantage.

Zenjirou had already discussed the matter with both Aura and Margarette herself, so he answered honestly. "Margarette has no such memories. Additionally, our only knowledge of her ancestry is that she was an orphan from the Northern Continent. Naturally, we have no proof that Margarette was a princess."

"But you do not have any proof she was not either, do you?" Yngvi asked with

a slight hint of relish on his face.

“In terms of definitive proof, that is true. However, if the testimonies we have gathered from our people and the warrior Kevin are both accurate, there is a contradiction in terms of timelines.”

Princess Margarete had been lost at sea in the early winter of the Northern Continent. Meanwhile, Margarete had been discovered by Capua in the first half of the active season. The difference in calendars meant that putting a definitive time span between the two events was difficult, but at the absolute longest span that made sense, Margarete had been found on the Southern Continent a mere fifteen days after the princess went missing.

The absolute cutting edge of intercontinental technology—the *Glasir's Leaf*—took between ninety and a hundred days to make the trip, so it seemed somewhat unlikely that the maid Margarete and the princess were the same person. The situation would have needed someone like Zenjirou—someone who could use teleportation—to make it possible.

With that explained, even Yngvi had to concede.

“I see. Well, that is a shame. I'd hoped to keep it going for a little while.”

“Yngvi,” the king said warningly before continuing. “Still, this is good news. Even Kevin would have to concede the point with this information.”

While Yngvi was disappointed, there was a clear note of relief in Gustav's voice. Eric had already been officially recognized as the next king of Ofus. He didn't want to bring up the “true heir to the throne” or the like at this point.

Perhaps fortunately, neither Ofus nor Uppasala had lineal magic, so they were not so insistent on the purity of the royal bloodline.

“We are glad to know it as well,” Zenjirou replied. Then his expression tightened. “To return to the earlier topic, do you have any knowledge of a connection between Utgard of the Northern Continent and the Utgardr that the Twin Kingdoms informed us of?”

The king remained silent for a long moment.

“Father?” Yngvi asked once the silence had continued for long enough.

The two gazes—one from his son at his side, and one from his son-in-law opposite—seemed to break through Gustav’s reticence and he eventually spoke. “I have never heard of an ‘Utgardr.’ However, I am forced to admit that the legends of Utgardr that the Twin Kingdoms relayed have many commonalities with the legends of Utgard that we have passed down in Uppasala. It also goes without saying that the names are similar.”

“Then would Utgard be—as the Twin Kingdoms said—descendants of the Jötunn?” Zenjirou asked directly.

Gustav remained silent for a few more moments before inclining his head slightly. “Our own legends do not say as much as clearly as that. Utgard has persisted since before even the White Empire, and they were said to be on par with the intelligent dragons—the true dragons. Additionally, they are said to have sheltered descendants from the White Empire.”

“I see.” Zenjirou nodded along, his thoughts swirling. It seemed that a lot of the legends passed down in both Uppasala and the Twin Kingdoms were rather similar. However, the legends in Uppasala were not attributed to “Utgardr,” but to “Utgard,” in addition to Uppasala having no mention of other worlds.

Naturally, it was impossible to know which of the two accounts was the truth. Therefore, it was more important to focus on the commonalities rather than the differences. It was all but impossible for both Bruno and Gustav to have conspired to create a coherent narrative beforehand. The amount of overlap despite that made it seem likely that there was more than a little truth to the parts that were in agreement.

Of course, while the mysteries lurking in Utgard’s past were interesting, it was the present they should be focusing on.

“I understand that Utgard is extremely unique. What exactly is their position within the Northern Continent—and indeed, within the five northern countries?”

In what way and to what extent would they involve themselves in the intercontinental trade deal between Capua and Uppasala? How would they react to hostilities from the church? How strong was their influence? These things and many others were points that Capua wanted to clarify. Naturally,

they had spoken about all of this with Freya and Skaji, but there was an almost unnaturally small amount of information they had on Utgard.

“So you wish to know of Utgard’s current standing? Well, they are the single country among the five that still have their lineal magic, and they are the foremost of all of us,” Gustav answered.

“Though really, they’re shut-ins. They interact with the others of the five as little as possible and have effectively no impact on the area. Still, we have to follow tradition and make sure they *can* attend this, or else we certainly hear about it,” Yngvi added.

“Yngvi, that is too far,” his father chided.

“My apologies, father.”

Despite the warning, Gustav pointedly didn’t refute his son’s claims, which meant that both the king’s explanation and the prince’s comment could be taken as fairly accurate. In other words, they would not involve themselves in the trade deal and were highly unlikely to join an alliance against the church. Therefore, as much as he’d like to postpone things, there was too much history between the Twin Kingdoms and the church, which was tied up with Utgard, to do so.

“I would like to open up communication with Utgard, if possible,” Zenjirou said. “Will that be difficult?”

“It would,” Gustav agreed simply. “While we and the others of the five northern countries have some degree of contact with them, I am unsure how Utgard as it stands would react to introducing another nation through those communicati—”

Partway through the king’s answer, something moved in the corner of Zenjirou’s vision. His eyes followed the movement, and his head turned to look.

“A cat?”

It was indeed a cat, standing politely on all fours on top of a table in the corner of the room. It had gray fur and was average size for a cat. They were not found on the Southern Continent but were relatively common in the north. The most attention-grabbing feature of the cat was the green stone in its

mouth.

The stone was transparent and glittered in the light. Perhaps it was even a precious gem. If so, then such a gem would certainly belong in a country's treasury, judging by its size. It was like a cat had sneaked its way into the palace and was playing a trick with the country's jewels.



“King Gustav?” Zenjirou asked.

A single look in their direction was enough to put paid to any thoughts of it being some simple prank. Yngvi had a look of shock the likes of which Zenjirou had never seen on his face, and was halfway out of his chair and drawing in a breath.

“Calm!” Gustav immediately bit out quietly. “No one must be brought here!”

Neither reaction was anything like what would be appropriate to a cat playing around. But Zenjirou had not reacted seriously enough in this situation. They were in an embassy entrusted to Capua, in an area of the Uppasalan palace, currently having a private meeting between both royal families. The entire area should have been under heavy guard. A simple cat should have no chance of sneaking its way in. If one did, one of the guards should have reported its breach.

Therefore, he could not understand either Yngvi’s immediate attempt to summon someone as he should, or Gustav’s instant chiding not to do so.

“Father?”

The king didn’t answer his son’s prompt, instead glaring steadily at the cat, a slight sheen of sweat on his brow. With all three men’s gazes focused on it, the cat opened its mouth. Inevitably, the green stone that had been held there fell. It made a dull thunk as it hit the tabletop the cat had been standing on before rolling off the edge and falling to the plush carpet without a sound. Zenjirou had followed the stone on its journey and now looked back up, but the gray cat had already vanished.

Even Zenjirou understood how strange that was. Attention taken by the falling gem or not, he hadn’t had his eyes off the cat for even a second. It had completely vanished in that time span, a blatantly supernatural phenomenon.

As Zenjirou’s and Yngvi’s wariness grew, Gustav relaxed, letting out a sigh of relief. He stood and walked briskly over to the stone.

“Father, is that not dangerous?”

“It is no danger. The gray cat is Utgard’s messenger.”

Zenjirou started in shock. They had literally *just* been discussing the country in a private meeting, and now a messenger from the country in question had appeared. Zenjirou was not foolish enough to be unbothered by that.

“Utgard’s messenger? I have never heard of that.”

“Because it is another thing only passed down to the king. This is the first time I have seen it in person,” Gustav answered as he picked up the stone. “As I thought... I believe, doing...this?”

He held the stone in his left hand, using his right index finger to draw a character on the surface. Immediately afterwards, the stone came undone. The phrasing sounded bizarre, but that was the only way to describe it. It was like unfurling origami back into the single sheet of paper it originally consisted of. In an instant, the green stone had become an oblong plate of the same color.

“Father?”

“What is that?”

Yngvi and Zenjirou both stood a second later, walking towards the king. The other man kept his gaze on the plate with a dumbfounded smile.

“An invitation to Utgard. Here, Your Majesty,” Gustav said, offering the plate—the invitation—to Zenjirou.

Zenjirou held back, though, looking at the king in shock. “Huh? I am allowed to look at it? Actually, I cannot even read the writing of the Northern Continent.”

Despite the refusal, Gustav handed it over with an almost wicked smile. “This is yours. The writing will not be an issue. As long as there is something you can read, you will be able to read this.”

Zenjirou honestly wasn’t sure what Gustav meant, but still had to give in and accept the plate. He then looked down at it. “Huh?”

No one would fault him for his shock. The writing across the plate was, without a doubt, Japanese. Kanji and hiragana were spread across the surface, and even the punctuation was correct.

The writing was—as Gustav had said—an invitation. After the representative’s

name and the form greetings, there was a paragraph inviting him to Utgard for friendly relations. The invitation was specified as being for two people. One of them was “Yamai Zenjirou.” Not Zenjirou Bilbo Capua, but Yamai Zenjirou. Zenjirou felt somewhat uneasy about seeing his old name written after so long, and he finally used his mana sense to look at the plate.

Just as he’d thought, it was full of mana. That made perfect sense. After all, it had turned from a stone into a flat sheet. If it wasn’t for magic, it would be utterly inexplicable.

Realizing that, he controlled his mana as best as he could, sealing it all up within himself and looked at the plate once again. The letters on it were completely unfamiliar to him. Of course, he could not read a single one of them. That was not all. What had looked like Japanese written in vertical columns was now clearly some other language written in rows. Because of what he was used to, it seemed to go from left to right, but there was no guarantee of that. It could possibly be read right to left as well.

That was a minor concern at this point. The main thrust was that there were letters that were automatically translated through mana.

“Your Majesty,” Zenjirou said. “What is this?”

“An invitation from Utgard, as it says. It is for two people; however, you are already named as one of them, so only one is open for others.”

“Ah, no. That was not what I was asking. *What* is it? A magic tool? The Twin Kingdom’s history talked about Utgard sheltering them, so is this part of their legacy?”

That was the most logical theory Zenjirou could come up with, combining everything he knew, but Gustav shook his head.

“No, it is not. This is magic writing, a spell unique to Utgard.”

“A spell unique to Utgard? I had heard that their lineal magic was centered on illusion. Is that not the case?”

Zenjirou had been informed of both the fact that Utgard was the only country among the five northern countries that had lineal magic of its own, and the magic in question was illusion magic. He hadn’t been told anything about what

that entailed, but the name made it sound like a matter of creating and manipulating false images.

None of that had anything to do with this translating itself. He glanced to the side to see Yngvi looking just as shocked, so it seemed unlikely that it was just a matter of not preparing enough before the meeting.

“Utgard’s lineal magic is indeed illusion magic,” Gustav agreed. “The magic writing is not locked to a single lineage; it is nothing more than a spell they have kept secret.”

A secret technique that was not lineal magic was lost on Zenjirou for the moment, but Gustav continued his explanation.

“Just as the magic language exists, understood through the spirits, so too does a writing system, simply called magic writing. It is even harder to use than the language itself, and I doubt there are any outside of Utgard actually capable of using it to a great extent. Still, it is not lineal magic.”

It took Zenjirou a moment to internalize the information. Then, he was overwhelmed by his feelings. There was shock, fear, and joy mixed together. Each of the feelings was too deep, overcoming him with a heady mix that defied easy description. Magic that was not lineal meant that anyone could learn it. It was hard to believe that such a thing both existed and had not spread.

“Is it really just a technique? Something that I could do if I learned it?”

“Solely in terms of ability, anyone who can perceive and manipulate mana can use the technique. However, the difficulty of doing so is horrifyingly high. Even the language itself is no comparison. Learning alone would be all but impossible. An accomplished writer and examples would be critical,” Gustav answered.

It was perhaps an unsurprising response. Learning a completely alien writing system with neither someone capable of already using it nor examples would transcend mere genius and be a practically supernatural ability.

“Magic writing...to think such a thing exists in Utgard... Father, is this another secret passed down through our kings?” Yngvi was just as shocked as Zenjirou, and even more excited.

Gustav nodded briefly. “It is. However, as Utgard has delivered His Majesty an invitation using the writing, there is no purpose in keeping it a secret from him, at least.”

Sending an invitation that so blatantly used the writing was a tacit approval of informing him of the spell’s existence. Or at least it could be taken as such. However, assuming it meant that knowledge of this writing could be disseminated far and wide would be a step too far.

“Your Majesty,” Gustav therefore said, “could I ask that you not spread this knowledge too far?”

Zenjirou agreed readily. “I had assumed as much. The only people who will hear of it from me are my wives, Aura and Freya.”

The contents of the invitation, what with Zenjirou traveling to Utgard to accept it, would be impossible to hide. However, it was entirely possible to hide how it was written, if they so desired. Still, while it would be possible to keep it just between the three of them, Zenjirou intended to tell both Aura and Freya. Aura, at the least, was nonnegotiable, as the matter was too big for Zenjirou to decide on his own.

Gustav likely understood the circumstances. After a few moments of thought, he nodded. “Very well. However, I implore you to only tell those two, and have the information spread no further. Skaji is no exception to that either,” he stressed.

“I understand. Would taking Freya as the other recipient of the invitation be acceptable?”

Refusing an invitation like this was not an option. However, since it would require showing his companion the invitation composed using magic writing, candidates would inevitably be limited to those who were aware of it.

The conversation they had just had meant that those who either knew about it—or could be informed of it—only numbered five in total. Discounting Zenjirou, who had already been invited, that was four. Gustav and Aura both had their positions as monarchs stopping them from easily accepting the invitation, which meant that there were only two real candidates.

Zenjirou understood that and had purposefully offered one of their names. As expected, a dramatic reaction to the suggestion came from the other candidate —Yngvi.

“It is not. Not Freya. It should be me. I will go. Indeed, it has to be me.”

The wild look in his icy-blue eyes, identical to Freya’s, meant that Zenjirou could barely muster a proper response.

“Yngvi,” his father said warningly, “stop this.”

Despite the chiding, the prince glared at Gustav. “I will not. I am perfectly prepared to throw a tantrum on the ground until my brother-in-law says he will take me.”

While Zenjirou would have loved to have considered that a mere threat, the look in Yngvi’s eyes said otherwise, and he’d shifted to be able to throw himself to the ground at a moment’s notice. Zenjirou was certain that the prince was deadly serious.

“Then again, the likes of this invitation have not been seen even in our country for over a century. Frankly, I would like one of ours to be among the guests. Considering the requirement to keep the writing a secret, Yngvi *is* the only candidate we have,” Gustav said with a sigh, before clapping his son heavily on the back.

“Father,” Yngvi breathed, overjoyed.

Despite the weight of the prince’s reaction, Zenjirou knew this issue was too great in scope for him to decide on alone.

“I understand Uppasala’s position,” he said. “However, I will need to return to Capua to discuss this with our queen before giving my response.”

Immediately, Yngvi was on the floor. “Nooo! Take me! Take *me*! Mee-eeee-ee!” he whined, throwing his limbs in all directions.

Yngvi Uppasala was indeed a man of his word.

Epilogue — A Private Discussion in the Inner Palace, or: A Spoiled Child's Tantrum

The next day, Zenjirou had returned to Capua via teleportation and was in another private meeting—this time, in the living room of the main building, with only Aura and Freya present. None of the maids or Skaji were present. They were not even allowed to wait in the hall. This was completely and utterly restricted to the three of them.

Zenjirou had just finished relaying everything that had taken place, offering up the green stone plate as evidence.

“Nooo! Take me! Take *me*! *Mee-eeee-ee!*” Freya whined, throwing her limbs this way and that in a tantrum.

Are you two twins? Well, yeah, you are, Zenjirou thought. He couldn't help but sympathize with and respect how much effort it must have taken to bring them up.

“Freya, come on, this isn't going anywhere; get back on the sofa,” Zenjirou tried.

“Come, stand. This is not something we should have to do,” Aura scolded her.

“Nooo!”

Zenjirou took Freya's right arm while Aura took her left to forcefully pull her up again. The princess was the spitting image of a child not getting her way.

Despite the apparent sobbing, they—mainly Aura—mercilessly pulled her back to the sofa and the tears stopped instantly.

“Uh, were you faking it?” Zenjirou had to ask, taken aback by how easily the display had stopped.

“No?” Freya half-asked. “I really was crying. I just got it out of my system.”

She'd cried out her unhappiness and then calmed herself. Zenjirou was

honestly somewhat impressed with her self-control. He and Freya had known each other for several years now, and their trip on the *Glasisir's Leaf* meant that they had spent a long time in close proximity. Even so, there were times when he was surprised by seeing new sides to her now that they were officially married.

He felt that the very ability to see this was due to them getting closer through their marriage. He was all but certain that he never would have seen such a side to her had they not gotten married, and it wasn't an entirely unpleasant feeling. However, what he had just seen was certainly not something that would be a massive deal if she refrained.

Either way, now that they were all back on the sofa, Zenjirou continued. "Just making sure, but can both of you read this? It looks like Japanese to me."

The red-haired queen and bluish-silver-haired princess answered in turn.

"I can. It looks to be the local language to me."

"It looks like my homeland's language to me too."

All three of them had looked at the plate placed in between them on the table. Despite the fact that they were looking at it at the same time, they were all seeing different languages. It was a strange feeling.

Still, when they thought about it, the conversations they exchanged on a daily basis were effectively the same thing. Even now, Aura was speaking in her local language, and the words sounded like Japanese to Zenjirou, while sounding like the northern tongue of the Northern Continent for Freya. Actually, consciously acknowledging that made it feel just as strange.

"Is automatic translation the only effect of this magic writing?" Aura asked.

Zenjirou nodded. "Apparently, yeah. Translation is all it is in this case, so you need to know how to read and write in at least one language. If someone is completely illiterate, it would be no help to them at all."

It was very similar to the soul of language in that way. Still, Aura didn't fail to pick up on the qualifier. "You said 'in this case.' Would there be magic writing where that is not the case?"

Zenjiro inclined his head for a moment before offering an unsure agreement. “I’m not certain, but I think there is, yes.”

He was caught up on it originally being a gem. The gem had been in the mysterious cat’s mouth. Gustav had picked it up and traced *something* on its surface, and it had unfolded into its current form.

Zenjiro wasn’t sure exactly what it was made from or how, but it felt like a thin sheet of transparent stone to him. It wouldn’t bend in the slightest, and he couldn’t scratch it. Obviously, he couldn’t fold it either. There had to be some kind of magic behind it morphing from a gem to a sheet.

“And you think that was due to the magic writing?” Freya asked once he had explained his observations. The look on her face was one of pure curiosity.

“Yeah. I didn’t get to see what happened up close, but it *looked* like King Gustav traced a letter on the gem. It makes me think there might be magic writing that can change a thing’s shape. It’s just a theory, though.”

“Would it be possible with a magic tool?” Aura asked. “If the Twin Kingdoms are to be believed, the Sharou family was once sheltered by Utgard, no?”

The question was one that Zenjiro had thought of before, so he could answer immediately. “I don’t think so. I couldn’t say for certain, but I think we can discount the possibility. After all, even if the Sharou family *used* to be there, they aren’t now, so any magic tools would be irreplaceable treasures. They wouldn’t be sending them out as invitations like this, at least.”

“True. But did *all* of the Sharou family come to the Southern Continent?”

“Huh?” Zenjiro had most definitely not expected that question.

“If the legends from both the Twin Kingdoms and Uppasala are true, then the Sharou family was sheltered by Utgard for a long time, and they left for the Southern Continent. Did every single member of the family leave them? Were there definitely no members of the family who hid themselves away in Utgard? That is what I would have done if I were the head of the family at the time. It would have ensured the bloodline did not die out.”

“Oh...”

Zenjirou had completely missed that possibility. While the legends all said that the descendants of the White Empire had escaped to the Southern Continent, the Sharou family had been sheltered in Utgard for a long time, and the country had continued its isolation ever since. It was entirely possible that they still housed descendants of the bloodline.

Aura offered her husband some words of encouragement, as he had lost his own footing. “I was just stating the possibility, but in truth, I feel the likelihood is rather low. If a branch family had been left behind in Utgard, then it strikes me that the information would have been passed down through the Sharou family. The former king made no mention of the like when we met.”

Of course, Bruno was under no obligation to share everything, so there was a chance that he did know of such a branch family and simply hadn’t mentioned it. There was also the chance that the knowledge had been lost over the long years. Therefore, the only conclusion they could draw was one of uncertainty.

“I imagine Prince Francesco or Princess Bona could tell us whether it was a magic tool or not if they could see it,” Aura commented.

“We can’t. The two of you are the only ones I can tell about the magic writing. I promised King Gustav as much.”

Aura offered a nod of acknowledgment. Ordinarily, she would have preferred to prioritize mentioning it to the prince over keeping a verbal promise. However, as the promise hadn’t been made by Aura or one of her nobles, but by Zenjirou, things were different. Zenjirou’s diplomacy was founded on honesty more than anything else. While there had been some trickery to the Rite of Age, no promises had been broken. There was a significant value to that, and it would have been a shame to lose it to something of this magnitude. Losing trust was simple, but gaining it back was far less so.

“Very well; unless King Gustav or Utgard give their permission, we will not speak of it elsewhere. Freya? You cannot tell even Skaji. Likewise, I will tell no one; not even Espiridion or Fabio.”

“I understand,” Freya agreed, her expression even. This was a secret that neither would spill to even their closest confidants—the head mage Espiridion and the secretary Fabio for Aura, and the bodyguard Skaji for Freya.

“I admit the secrecy makes actually doing anything difficult, so when I’m in Utgard, I’ll try and get permission to tell at least one person from the Sharou family,” Zenjirou said, pulling the conversation back on track.

Now that the topic of the trip had returned, the look of seriousness on Freya’s face changed slightly.

“So, Sir Zenjirou, about your companion. Well...” she said, trailing off.

His wife’s questioning prompted him to look at his other wife for help. However, Aura simply nodded with a blank expression, adding no comment of her own. It seemed that the final decision would rest with him.

Zenjirou was at the center of the matter, and considering all three of their positions, he could understand the responsibility falling to him. Still, since he could easily see how what he was going to say would make things rather chaotic, he’d still had a fleeting hope that Aura might take the burden. It seemed, though, that he would just have to screw up his courage.

“Freya,” he said.

“Yes?” Her icy-blue eyes met his.

“I’m taking Prince Yngvi to Utgard. You are staying here,” he said quickly, getting it all out in a single breath.

There was a beat of silence before Freya slipped down from the sofa, lying on the floor. Then... “Noooo-oooh! I want to go! Me! Take me! Take *me*! Mee-eeee-ee!”

“I can’t,” Zenjirou said. “Considering our relationship with Uppasala, I can’t take you over him, can I?”

“Come now, Freya. Do not be so unreasonable. If you keep this up, there will be no ice cream for you tonight.”

Despite the logical argument from Zenjirou, and the threat from Aura, Freya’s tantrum didn’t abate.

“Nooo! Take me! Take *me*! Mee-eeee-ee!”

The whole scene looked less like a man and his two wives and more like a couple and their daughter.

“Bear with it, Freya. I’ll make up for it when I get back.”

“You cannot spoil her too much, Zenjirou.”

“Well, I know just how much she longs for adventure and the unknown.”

“Hm, I see your point,” Aura conceded after a moment. It sounded utterly absurd for a princess in her teens to captain a ship and undertake an intercontinental move, but her wanderlust had been strong enough to push that absurdity into reality.

“I’ll get you a gift for your patience,” Zenjirou offered. “A dress, some jewelry, something like that. Maybe even some of the gold work from Talajeh? Of course, if I find something interesting in Utgard, I’ll bring you back a souvenir as well.”

Aura’s understanding resulted in a wordless nod. Upon hearing that, Freya’s crying stopped immediately and her eyes drifted up to meet his.

“I would prefer a ship to dresses or jewels. Maybe even accelerating the development of the Alcott port...”

Her requests were of a completely different order of magnitude. They were requests that she absolutely could not make when only Zenjirou was present, if only due to the chance that he might agree. The result was perhaps what she should have expected.

“You are getting carried away!” Aura scolded her.

“Eeep!”

Aura had grabbed hold of the other woman’s collar and lifted her mercilessly up into the air.

To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life* 15.

Appendix — The Maids and Maids' South-North Exchange

It was the afternoon, and the blazing season was nearing its end. The prince consort, Zenjirou, was in Uppasala for business. Aura was taking her lunch in the royal palace, so the main building of the inner palace had a relatively relaxed atmosphere that day.

According to the calendar, it *was* still the blazing season, so there was a long break that allowed for afternoon naps, but the temperature could be relatively low on some days. Today was one of those days. The elderly and those who worked out in the elements would still retire to their rooms after lunch for a rest, but others—those who were still young and energetic but not particular about their work—treated the lunch breaks on cooler blazing season days as free time.

It went without saying that the three problem maids—Faye, Dolores, and Letti—were the prototypical examples of such people.

“Yup, that’s great.”

“It really is.”

“Hmm, maybe it would be better if it rose more? Maybe I could add more baking soda?”

Faye, Dolores, and Letti were chatting as they enjoyed their free time, pancakes on wooden plates in front of them. They had wooden forks that they were using to break portions off to sample.

While Faye was happily enjoying the sweetness and Dolores was nodding along in satisfaction, Letti was the only one finding problems with them. Perhaps it was her pride as their creator, or even a result of the personal training she had received from Vanessa.

The recipe, it went without saying, had come from Zenjirou. He had originally brought a wide variety of both sweet and savory products. However, the

sweeter snacks mostly relied on dairy products and thus were impossible to reproduce. Nicolai's efforts had changed that, though. His rearing of the goats had brought about not just milk, but cheese, butter, and cream—albeit in small quantities. In turn, more of Zenjirou's recipes were usable. Of course, milk was one thing, but there was by no means a stable supply of other dairy products. Indeed, there was much to do before any of it, milk included, was up to snuff.

Incidentally, the impetus for Zenjirou remembering the pancakes was less an increase in dairy products and more the maple syrup they had brought back from the Northern Continent. Zenjirou associated the pancakes with the syrup. Of course, it was also true that the only real use he could think of for syrup was pouring it on pancakes.

Either way, he had provided the recipe, but with it needing adjustments and testing for the best method, it was more the domain of the maids to make it and test it during their downtime. If they asked for permission to use the inner palace's facilities and ingredients—within reasonable limits—they could do so. Of course, repeated failures that wasted ingredients would be another matter, but the maid in charge of the kitchen trusted Letti, which allowed the other two in the trio to benefit as well. Since there was not a stable supply of butter, and the only way to get maple syrup was by buying it through teleportation, those two ingredients were scarce and valuable. Still, Zenjirou had given the maids permission to use them in the name of perfecting the recipe.

After she had put the butter and maple syrup—retrieved from the fridge in the living room—on the pancakes, Letti asked the others for their opinions again.

“What do you two think?”

“Mmm? They're good,” Faye responded.

“Right. I don't have any complaints,” Dolores agreed.

The other two could only offer vague praise, which was less than helpful to the pancakes' creator.

Letti protested in response. “What? I can't give Sir Zenjirou or Queen Aura these. I don't think Lady Vanessa would be happy with them either.”

“Right, she *is* fairly strict when it comes to this sort of thing.”

“Of course she is; it’s her specialty.”

Vanessa was, by far, the kindest and most easygoing out of any of the maids’ superiors. The younger maids were unanimous on that front, but she was not easygoing about *everything*. She was *intensely* exacting about the food served to the lords and ladies of the inner palace: Zenjirou and Aura initially, but now the new concubine Freya as well. She was the same when it came to how food was dealt with and even more so about safety.

Vanessa was particularly vigilant when it came to the contents of the fridge. That was perhaps a given. The three meals of the day were all checked by her, but Zenjirou and Aura both took food directly from the fridge.

It was exceptionally hard to make sure that there was nothing that had gone bad or potentially been contaminated with toxic material, in the worst case, within the fridge. Because of that, the servants who now worked in the gardens and bathrooms were not allowed to even enter the living room, let alone touch the fridge itself. The only ones permitted inside were those who dealt with the washing. That meant they were both more strictly vetted but also better paid. Being selected for the laundry work had already become a mark of status among the girls. They were watched by the maids, though, and were not allowed near the fridge. Even the maids Freya had brought with her—and indeed the Capuan maids assigned to her—were not presently permitted to touch the fridge.

While the trio themselves did not realize it, they were actually highly trusted in that respect. Of course, that was in terms of trusting them not to harm any of the three royals. In terms of their overall competence and diligence in their work, the servants were more highly regarded.

Another maid stepped into the room as the three problem maids enjoyed their time off. All three of them noticed the new arrival at roughly the same time, but it was Dolores who greeted her first.

“Oh, Rebecca? This is a surprise. Are you coping all right today?”

The young woman walked over in response to the greeting. She was one of the new maids Freya had brought with her from Uppasala. Therefore, she was

pale and had long, straight locks of blonde hair and green eyes. Her entire color scheme was rather eye-catching in Capua.

Fortunately, the inner palace already had another maid—Margarette—with a similar appearance, so no one stared or anything, but she still stood out.

“It’s been a while, Dolores. You too, Faye, Letti. Is this seat free?”

“Of course,” Faye answered.

“Sure, go ahead and sit,” Letti agreed.

Rebecca sat at the table as well. It had already been over a month since she and the other Uppasalan maids had arrived in Capua, but there had been few enough chances for them to see Faye and the others that the “it’s been a while” was not unwarranted.

This wasn’t anything as serious as segregation between the main building where Aura lived and the annex for Freya. No, it was just due to the season. The Uppasalan maids—who had not set foot out of their country before—found the blazing season of Capua practically unbearable. Therefore, outside of their work hours, they had all but shut themselves away in their room with the magic tool to cool the area.

Faye and the others were both surprised and worried to see Rebecca out and about when she was perfectly within her rights to stay in that room.

“Are you not managing to sleep?” Dolores asked. “Although, today *is* pretty cool.” As she spoke, she swiftly poured out a cup of cold tea and placed it in front of Rebecca.

“Thank you. Honestly, I cannot say I’m doing ‘well’ at all. Frankly, I’m appalled you can call this heat ‘cool.’ I won’t be staying long, but I can’t just shut myself away forever.”

The woman, maintaining impeccable manners, then proceeded to drain her cup in almost a single swallow. Indeed, she didn’t look particularly well. While she wasn’t pale enough to look ill, her green eyes were flat, and both her voice and actions lacked any real dynamism.

She was here despite that, at the request of her lady, Freya, who had

instructed her maids to form bonds with the Capuan staff as best they could. Rebecca could understand why. The most important thing a noblewoman needed when she married into a foreign country was a strong relationship with her husband. The second was a good relationship with her husband's family, and the third was for the subordinates she brought with her to integrate with the local workers.

Additionally, in Freya's case, she had brought far fewer maids with her for the inner palace than a normal royal would. Of course, that had been balanced out by other Uppasalans, such as Völundr the smith, but the fact remained that there were few of her people to help her within the inner palace.

They were few enough that they could not maintain Freya's lifestyle within the inner palace. For both her comfort and—when you looked closer—her safety, it was all but essential for the Uppasalans to grow closer to the locals. Fortunately, the few maids she had brought had been carefully selected. While they naturally had significant skill as maids, they had also been picked for their lack of timidity with new people and their general affability.

As a result, Faye, who was no shrinking violet in the slightest; Dolores, who was able to form relationships based on their benefit; and Letti, who was just generally a good person, were all rather open with the new maids, even with the relatively small amount of interaction they had.

"Don't push yourself too hard, Rebecca. Want a pancake?" Letti asked in concern.

Rebecca looked at the pancakes before shaking her head with a pained look. "Sorry, but I can't. I love sweet things, but I think I'd collapse if I ate something hot," she replied. Apparently, she was right on the verge between managing to cope and not.

"Rebecca, you really shouldn't go too far," Dolores chided her.

"Yeah, couldn't you just stay in your room until it's time?" Faye asked.

Rebecca smiled in return. "Thank you, but I'm fine. I need to get used to it. I feel bad for Lady Freya instead," she insisted.

She was probably forcing herself to say as much, and perhaps as proof of that,

she didn't react at all to Letti getting up in apparent realization. She may not have even noticed, in fact. The reason she felt worse for Freya was that she had it far worse in the blazing season than they did. While the maids generally never left the inner palace and could retreat to their cooler room if the need arose, Freya had to attend meals in the royal palace from time to time. It went without saying that the other palace had none of the mist generators. In that respect, perhaps she was in a harsher situation.

"Princess Freya has spent over a year in the country. She's also had training as a warrior, so you shouldn't compare yourself to her."

"Faye, you're supposed to be calling her 'Lady,' not 'Princess,'" Dolores warned her.

"Oh, whoops. My mistake; I meant Lady Freya," she corrected herself hurriedly, putting a hand over her mouth.

Freya had ordered them not to refer to her as 'princess,' to make her position as Zenjirou's concubine clearer than her original status as a princess of Uppasala. Therefore, strictly speaking, Faye had just disobeyed one of her orders. However, it had been both unintentional and not in front of her, so it was a minor issue at most. In fact, Rebecca had no complaints about it either. Still, she disagreed with something else that Faye had said.

"I'm sure you're right that acclimatizing to it is a large part of it, but the latter half is wrong."

"Huh? Lady Freya wasn't trained as a warrior? I heard she was," Faye replied.

Rebecca gave a small but proud smile before answering. "That isn't wrong, but you said that I shouldn't compare myself to her in that way, no? However, we are the same in that way."

"Huh?" It took Faye a moment to understand what Rebecca meant.

Conversely, Dolores immediately cottoned on to the implication and exclaimed in surprise, "What?! You were trained as a warrior?" she asked.

"Oh, that's what you mean," Faye added, still surprised but understanding what the other girl had meant now.

Rebecca's smile took on a conflicted air as she nodded. "Indeed. I was trained since I was young. I convinced my parents and trained that way, even taking the rites to call myself a warrior...but I failed. Lady Freya and I really are alike, although I was stronger as a fighter than her. I was much closer to succeeding, and even as we've sparred, I have never lost a bout to her."

She flexed her arm as she spoke. They looked again and could see that she was built differently than most women. Her neck, arms, and chest all had a thicker layer of muscle than was typical. The table was in the way, but her legs would likely show the same features. Rather than a soft build, she seemed more lithe, looking like someone who had actually trained themselves.



Faye and Dolores had a completely different impression of the other woman now.

“That’s amazing,” Faye told her.

“Countries that officially recognize women as warriors are something else,” Dolores commented.

“Oh? But surely Capua has female warriors as well, no?”

The two didn’t immediately understand what she meant, and both of them cocked their heads, but Dolores soon figured it out.

“Oh, you mean Her Majesty? That’s an exception,” she said.

Rebecca blinked in surprise but let it pass without question. “Oh? Ah...yes, Her Majesty is rather exceptional.” She was not talking about Aura.

There were two maids in the inner palace whom Rebecca judged to be as capable in a fight as her, or perhaps even more so. However, now that she considered it, both wore the same outfits as the others and were not visibly armed. They had been trained—perhaps intentionally—such that their muscles were less visible. Therefore, it was easy to imagine that the maids as a whole were unaware.

I should talk to Lady Freya and Lady Skaji about it just in case, she decided.

While Rebecca was making that decision, Letti returned to the table carrying a covered metal tray. The trays were a custom that Freya had brought from Uppasala. They had a long winter in the north, so the locals had come up with this approach to keep food warm after it had been heated, but Letti was using it for the opposite purpose here.

“Rebecca, do you think you can manage this?” she asked, uncovering the tray. Atop it was a small plate, and on top of that plate was a familiar food item: a pancake. Unlike the pancakes the trio had been eating, though, it was not steaming with heat, but had been chilled in the fridge in such a way that it had been kept from drying out. The pancake itself wasn’t topped with butter or syrup, but ice cream.

“Letti?!” Faye yelled in shock.

“You didn’t?!” Dolores added.

Letti just smiled softly back. “I did. It’s from my portion, though, so don’t worry,” she told them before addressing Rebecca. “Of course, you don’t need to force yourself to eat it, but it’s cold, so I thought you might be able to manage it.”

Letti sat down as she spoke. Faye and Dolores leaned forward over the table.

“You really don’t need to force yourself!” Faye exclaimed.

“Right! You shouldn’t push yourself! What if you forced yourself and it made you feel worse? That’d completely defeat the point,” Dolores added.

Their behavior made it obvious just how strongly the three valued the cold pancake Letti had brought over. Rebecca’s actions were driven less by hunger and more by curiosity and a slight desire to tease Faye and Dolores as she picked up a fork.

“I would feel bad turning you down, Letti. Thank you.”

While it was cool for the blazing season, the air still easily felt over thirty degrees, and the plate itself had a chill to it. Pulled in by her curiosity, Rebecca scooped up a portion of the pancake and ice cream before bringing it to her mouth.

The second it touched her tongue, she sat bolt upright. Freezing cold assaulted her entire mouth along with a refreshing sweetness. It was hard to make cold things taste sweet, and yet this was sweet enough to have taken buckets of sugar. It was completely different from the sweetness of maple syrup.

For someone from Uppasala, who imported sugar at a premium, it was an intensely luxurious flavor. Additionally, for someone from Capua, it was an inexplicable food item. In Uppasala, there was—when the weather was suitable—something like a milk sorbet made using goat milk. However, it would be impossible to make the same thing in Capua. After all, they would have no way of freezing the milk.

Technically, there might be places cool enough even in Capua—perhaps at the summits of mountains—and it would be *possible* for someone that could use

teleportation to get it here before it melted. However, the possibility didn't even bear consideration. The only two in the country who would be capable of it were Aura and Zenjirou, and there was no way the queen or prince consort would be teleporting into the mountains to make snacks for the maids. It would be completely backwards.

Silently, Rebecca ferried the pancake and ice cream to her mouth.

"Aw..."

"You like it? Yeah, I guess you don't even need to say."

Faye and Dolores looked saddened, but Rebecca devoured the entire confection in practically a blink of an eye.

"Thank you, Letti. That was delicious," she said with a wide smile. "I'm sure I'll be dreaming about it tonight."

It certainly didn't seem like she was exaggerating. Rebecca's eyes, practically dead from the heat before, now had a light in their depths again.

"Honestly...I cannot even imagine how that was made. There must be something that made it possible," Rebecca murmured in wonder.

"There is," Dolores answered after a moment's thought. "It's something like a magic tool. Sir Zenjirou brought it from his homeland."

It was impossible to hide the generator—arguably the root of all of the appliances—from the new maids, so they were allowed to be informed of the existence of the appliances.

"Magic tools. I see. Honestly, I thought that the Northern Continent was much more advanced than the Southern, but I've reconsidered since arriving here. Those fireballs in particular are a large part of it. They make lighting places much easier. The mist generators are essential as well, of course."

Despite how impressed Rebecca sounded, Dolores had personally seen the Northern Continent, so she corrected her with a rueful smile.

"Your first impression was right. The Northern Continent is more advanced overall. The palaces of the bigger nations with magic tools are exceptions, though."

Zenjirou and Aura had ordered many magic tools from Francesco and Bona for Freya's arrival to the inner palace. They had prioritized the mist-generating tools but had also commissioned several of the static flames for lighting. Zenjirou had spent a fair amount of time in Uppasala's palace and noticed that even commoners generally used candles for illumination.

Meanwhile, in the Capuan palace, candles were limited in use, and most lighting was done with oil lamps. Zenjirou had been uneasy asking people used to candles to transition to oil lamps. Light from loose flaming liquid was more dangerous when one wasn't used to it.

The mix of Zenjirou's concern and Aura's decision that it would serve as a physical sign of their welcome to the new concubine meant that they had set up several of them in Freya's annex. Discounting those magic tools and the appliances Zenjirou had brought from Earth, the Northern Continent was definitely more technologically advanced than the Southern Continent. In the commonwealth, even lodgings with a somewhat refined clientele had window panes, and the ports had cranes, albeit ones powered by people.

Even limiting the comparison to Uppasala, the general technological level of the country as a whole was higher than Capua's. Of course, there were exceptions in both directions under limited circumstances.

"Oh, right, Lady Skaji is generally armed even within the inner palace, but you aren't? You might not have quite made it, but you were close, right? Surely it would be a shame to let your skills wane."

Dolores's question prompted a taken-aback look from Rebecca. After a few moments thinking, the Northerner shook her head regretfully.

"While this isn't Uppasala, and I am part of Capua for the time being—so it would not cause an issue for me to train—that is only true for a short while. Once I have served my time here, I will be returning to Uppasala and getting married, so I should not go too much against their customs."

In Uppasala, a woman who failed the rites would be viewed as not knowing when to give up if she kept acting as a warrior. Of course, there would be no issue at all if she used her skills to save herself or someone she was serving. In that respect, Freya would be considered rather wayward with her tendency to

have a spear or axe to hand at any opportunity. She would call them precautions for emergencies, but it was rather hard to excuse when she was accompanied by Skaji yet still insisted on hunting a drake herself while having her bodyguard stay back. For better or worse, Rebecca was not quite as extreme as Freya.

“Oh, so you’re heading back to Uppasala to get married rather than marrying here?” Faye asked innocently.

Rebecca’s face took on a conflicted cast as she answered. “If one of us wished, we could marry here and remain assigned to Lady Freya, becoming part of this country’s nobility...assuming we found someone to marry, of course. However, that isn’t possible for me. I made a promise to my father in exchange for my training. I agreed that if I failed, I would follow his desires with regard to marriage.” It was essentially impossible that such a marriage would involve a man from Capua.

“I see. That’s a shame,” Faye said, her expression suiting her words. Despite that, though, she saw it as simply being how things worked and accepted it. Whatever else she was, Faye was a noblewoman. It was a matter of course that the final decisions in such matters weren’t with the woman herself, but with the head of the family.

However, things were not quite the same in Uppasala.

“That wouldn’t have been a problem if I had succeeded,” Rebecca commented, somewhat regretfully.

“Did he promise to let you choose if you succeeded?” Letti asked.

Rebecca shook her head. “No, that’s not what I meant. A female warrior is on the level of a centurion, so she can form a branch family of her own volition. Of course, she would need to have the land, weapons, horses, and so on to be recognized as such, so it is not easy. If she can solve those issues, though, a female warrior can become the head of a family.”

Branch family or not, being a family head meant that even her father or brothers would have no right to give her orders. That said, a branch family was generally expected to defer to the main family in exchange for protection, so she would not necessarily be completely free.

“Huh? So what about Lady Skaji?” Dolores asked.

“Indeed, she is the head of her own branch family.”

“Oh, then would Lady Freya have been able to do the same if she’d succeeded?” Letti asked.

“Well...probably not. I cannot say for sure, since she is the only female royal who has attempted it to my knowledge, but most male royals have the same rank or higher. They would need the king’s permission to create a branch family.”

It was an obvious restriction. A normal noble branch family usually wouldn’t have much impact on the governing of the country. However, if the royal family could create branches so easily, it could easily become chaos.

“Do many women try for it?” Faye asked innocently. “Like Elvira, maybe?”

Elvira was one of the young maids who shared a room with Rebecca. She was also the one who had been temporarily sent back to Uppasala at Zenjirou’s direction.

“Elvira is different. She was just chosen for her maid skills and personality. Generally, there aren’t many women who aim to become warriors. Usually, it is just those who are particularly strong or energetic from a young age. However, in Lady Freya’s and my generation, there may be more than normal due to Lady Skaji’s influence.”

When Freya and Rebecca had still been young girls, Skaji—or Victoria at the time, since she’d had yet to receive the name—had gained her rank and was unassailable even from the men of her generation, so the young girls had admired her. It was no strange thing that those their age had wanted to become like Skaji. More of their generation had therefore at least attempted to follow the same path.

“I guess bigger women are the ones that make it,” Letti commented. “From our perspective, you’re pretty big, but I guess the warriors are all like Lady Skaji? Or maybe Dolores?”

“Well, Lady Skaji is an exception among exceptions. She stands head and shoulders above even the other female warriors. She stands even further above

them in skill, though. Dolores would be fairly tall among most of them. If I'd been that tall, I'd have definitely made it," Rebecca answered with a somewhat reproachful glare at Dolores.

"Don't look at me like that. I can't give you any of my height."

"I know, but that doesn't stop me being jealous," Rebecca answered with a sigh.

On average, the Sveans who made up most of Uppasala were taller than Capuans. However, that was just the overall average; there were taller and shorter individuals in both groups. Rebecca was around 170 centimeters tall, about average for an Uppasalan woman, so she was envious of Dolores's roughly ten-centimeter lead on her.

"Being tall is helpful for getting married in general, not just trying to become a warrior," Rebecca added.

There was a strong tendency towards militarism in Uppasala since the country was founded by pirates and warriors. Because of that, even the nobility wanted their children to be strong. Whether or not there was a scientific explanation for it in this era, there was anecdotal evidence of children tending to be similar to their parents in build. Therefore, people who wanted stronger and larger children saw height as a desirable trait in the women they married. However, there were more than a few men who would find their pride wounded by women like Skaji, who were taller than them.

"Huh, it's completely different than here," Faye commented.

"Right. Men are supposed to be tall, but it's not so much a thing for women. If anything, there's a slight prejudice against tall women, maybe?" Dolores said.

The lack of qualms from either of them—with each of them being on either extreme of the spectrum—showed Rebecca how true the comments were.

"I see. Then what is the preference for women here?" she asked. "Standing and appearance?"

Dolores considered for a while before answering. "Well, standing is definitely the most important thing. Looks and personality are important too, of course, but the other thing would be mana capacity, I suppose."

“Mana capacity?” Rebecca asked, taken aback. She had not expected that in the slightest. However, it was just a fact of life for Capuans.

“Yeah, mana capacity is important.”

“Right, I’ve heard that it helps commoners as well as nobles,” Letti added.

The royals and nobles in Capua were proud of their mana reserves. Large amounts of mana offered commoners a leg up in the world as well. Therefore the amount of mana a person had was important in marriage for both nobles and commoners.

Rebecca offered an impressed breath once the three of them had finished explaining. “This country really is different than Uppasala. In the past, the royal and noble families had significant amounts of mana as well, but there is much less of a tendency to see it as important. I imagine that commoners don’t care about it at all.”

Magic hadn’t fallen out of use entirely in Uppasala, but it was much less of a focus than on the Southern Continent.

The response prompted a realization from Dolores. “Actually, the warriors in Uppasala and the mages here might be pretty similar. Women can’t become warriors here, but they can become mages. They can even rise high in the ranks, like Lady Pasquala.”

Pasquala was the head mage Espiridion’s wife. She herself was a skilled mage as well and worked in the royal court. She was no exception either; there were several other women who were official mages, even if not as many as there were men.

“That does indeed sound similar,” Rebecca agreed.

Patriarchal societies with an emphasis on people capable of fighting, along with a class system involving royals, nobility, and commoners, led to a lot of similarities between the two nations, but the biggest difference was the emphasis on magic.

With that realization, Faye spoke up—oddly hesitantly for her. “Um, so Uppasala prizes warriors even more than us, right? They don’t put as much importance on mana capacity, though. So...how is Sir Zenjirou seen over

there?”

It was something that the maids of the inner palace were immensely curious about, and certainly something they should check. However, in light of the previous information and what they knew about Zenjirou, it also took quite a large amount of courage to ask.

Indeed, Rebecca’s green eyes were roving around looking for an escape. However, she let out a resigned sigh and began to speak quietly. “Well...you likely aren’t too far off the mark. It would be rather rude to be too specific, so please leave it there.”

It was rude enough to indicate that giving details would be offensive, but that was how Zenjirou was seen in Uppasala. Capua hadn’t appraised him particularly well to begin with. He was by no means large, and his body was completely untrained. His demands were weak and he had kept up a gentle demeanor. Even so, he had managed to be seen as a proper royal, as he had inherited the family’s lineal magic, and he had more than just the bare minimum amount of mana for a royal.

However, in Uppasala, lineal magic had nothing to do with royalty, and they didn’t place much value on mana capacity. Additionally, Zenjirou was of average build for an adult male in Capua, so in Uppasala he was firmly in the “slight” category...in a country that prized a man’s size.

All of that combined meant that even conservatively, Uppasala wouldn’t think too highly of him. Rebecca clearly felt that she should speak in his defense, and her words tumbled from her lips.

“There are those who are very impressed with him, though. King Gustav and Prince Yngvi hold him in quite high esteem. Second Queen Felicia is also deeply grateful to him, but that is because he married Lady Freya, not quite because she holds him personally in high regard.”

“That’s *really* detailed,” Dolores said, unable to hide her surprise at the information the other had given.

“It’s secondhand, but it comes from Lady Ragnhild so I’m sure it’s right.”

“Lady Ragnhild?”

“You said Lady Ragnhild, right?”

“I guess she does seem really put together.”

The three problem maids all tilted their heads at her answer. Ragnhild was the older maid Freya had brought from Uppasala. The first impression the young maids had formed of her was: “Amanda but in different colors.” The impression they had of her after a month was much the same. They therefore all agreed that she was someone who wouldn’t lie pointlessly, but they couldn’t understand how she could be so informed about the royal family.

Conversely, Rebecca couldn’t understand what they had missed, but eventually came to the reason. “Oh. Right, families aren’t mentioned or asked about publicly to put you all on equal footing. Does that mean that not only have we not heard of your standing, but you haven’t heard of ours?”

Apparently, she had assumed it was only a restriction for the Uppasalans and not something that the Capuan maids had to follow.

“That’s right,” Dolores said, correcting her assumption. “We don’t know anything about your families or standings right now, like you don’t know anything about ours.”

“Right, then I suppose I shouldn’t say anything,” Rebecca answered before falling silent.

Dolores disagreed, though. “No, it wouldn’t be a problem. Like you said, we can’t talk about them officially or in public. Some of us have known each other since before we came to the inner palace, so unofficially, it’s not a problem.”

The inner palace was divorced from society as a whole, but the maids’ lives were not solely within its confines. In extreme cases, if two maids from completely different strata managed to start feuding without knowing their respective standings, it could end disastrously after they both left the palace. The more highly placed maid wouldn’t necessarily be the kind to let such grudges go for the rest of their lives. Therefore, while *officially* the maids weren’t to talk about their standings, they were almost encouraged to do so unofficially.

Once Dolores explained all of that, Rebecca nodded several times in

understanding.

“I see. Then I suppose it would not cause issues if I say this. Both Her Majesty and Sir Zenjirou are aware, but Lady Ragnhild is Lady Freya’s aunt.”

The casual dropping of the bomb prompted yells of shock from the problem maids.

“What?!”

“No way?!”

“She’s royalty?!”

Dolores was the last to speak, and Rebecca shook her head.

“She isn’t. She is Lady Freya’s mother’s older sister. She was born into a marquis’s family and married quite a while ago, so she is now a countess, a rather highly ranked noble.”

Lady Ragnhild was therefore someone Freya could trust almost without question, though she also had the classic views of a noblewoman, which made their relationship rather awkward.

“Huh,” Faye breathed, taking in the new information.

Rebecca shrugged, poking her tongue out. “I’m rather similar to Lady Freya in that sense as well. I don’t have the right constitution for a noblewoman but failed to become a warrior and still regret that, so Lady Ragnhild often glares at me.”

Ragnhild had chosen Rebecca as the maid who was closest emotionally to the princess, while Elvira was chosen as the most trustworthy and capable. When the trio finished listening to that explanation, they exchanged looks of understanding.

“Ah, I see,” Faye said first.

“Right, she’s one of us.”

“One of us.”

There were many similarities to be seen in Ragnhild’s behavior towards Rebecca and Amanda’s behavior towards the trio.

“Uh? Why are you three suddenly acting so familiarly?” Rebecca asked, confused.

Rude though it may sound, the three problem maids had designated Rebecca as their fourth compatriot.

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

14

“Sir Zenjirou?
Did you really
not think of
that?”

Illustrator:
**Jyuu
Ayakura**

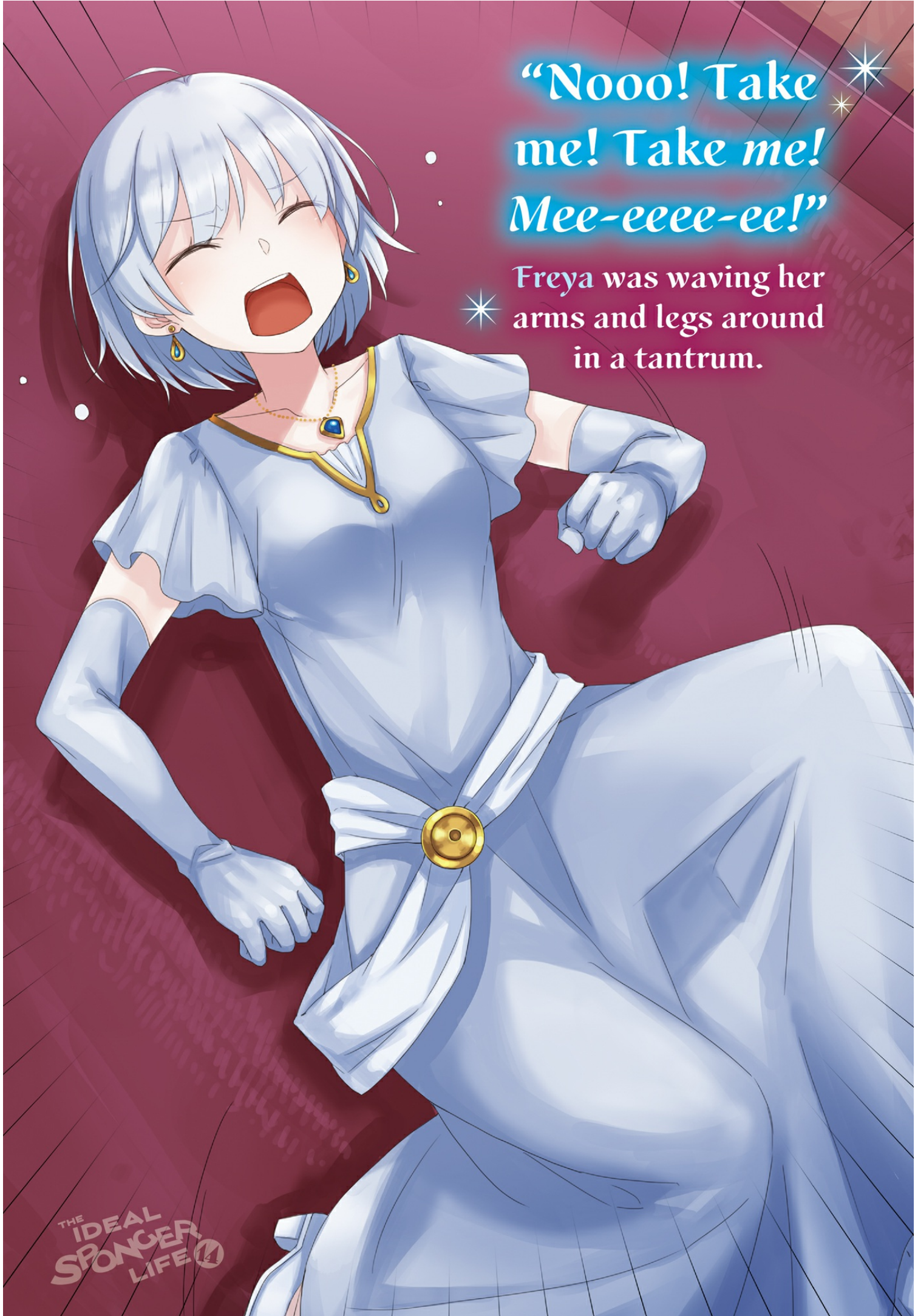
Author:
**Tsunehiko
Watanabe**





Prince Yngvi
immediately dropped
to the floor.

“Nooo! Take
me! Take me!
Mee-eeee-ee!”

A full-page illustration of a young woman with short, light blue hair and a determined, slightly pouting expression. She is wearing a light blue, short-sleeved dress with a large gold button at the waist and a gold necklace with a blue gem. She is also wearing long, light blue gloves. Her arms are outstretched, and her legs are spread wide, suggesting a tantrum or a playful pose. The background is a dark red, textured surface. The text is in a stylized, glowing blue font with white outlines and small starburst effects.

“Noooo! Take
me! Take me!
Mee-eeee-ee!”

Freya was waving her
arms and legs around
in a tantrum.



Margarette's
smile was almost
frenzied as she
answered.

“That is
exactly
what I
want.”

“I would
accept
whatever
I was
given,”

Lucretia
answered
briskly as
she leaned
forward.

Zenjirou listened to his wife's words, resolved himself, and then gave the command to the dash drake.

"R-Right.
Forward!"

As he called out the command, he lightly used his right heel to tap at the drake's side. The intelligent dash drake began slowly walking off.







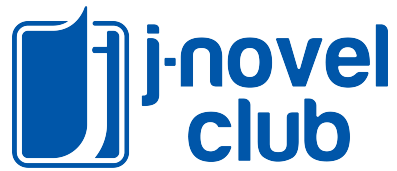












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RISOU NO HIMOSEIKATSU

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